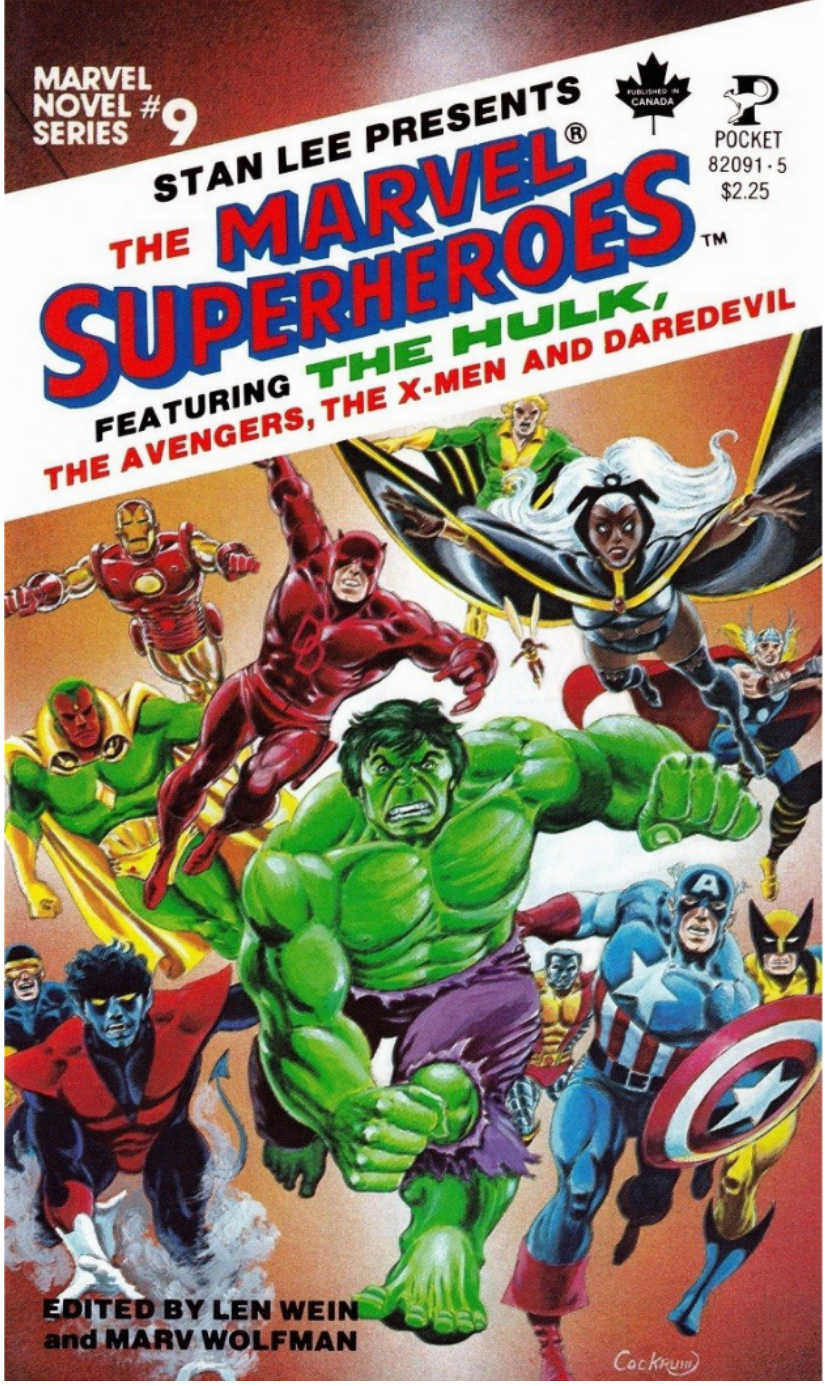
MARVEL NOVEL SERIES #9
STAN LEE PRESENTS
THE MARVEL® SUPERHEROES™
FEATURING THE HULK, THE AVENGERS, THE X-MEN AND DAREDEVIL
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**“ODIN’S BEARD!” THOR CRIED.
“THE MONSTER DOTH ENDURE!”**

Only a small dent in Ultron’s chest marked the impact of Mjolnir, though it had driven him back half the breadth of the room and deep into the reinforced concrete floor.

“Your worst cannot injure me, Thunder God! Now feel the naked power of Ultron without your vaunted hammer to protect you.”

From nowhere, Captain America leaped in front of Ultron, taking with his shield the full fury of Ultron’s blast beam, reflecting most of the force back against Ultron himself. He staggered back a step, but Captain America was bowled over.

“Come, demon, let us match strength ’gainst strength!” said Thor, suddenly leaping forward to grapple with Ultron.

“I see only how easily you are tricked, fool,” cackled Ultron, as searing energy lanced from his glowing eyes, striking Thor full in the face.

“Mine eyes! I cannot see!” Thor’s grip faltered momentarily and Ultron broke free, raising his ultra-hard fists to bring down a death blow . . .

Packaged and edited by
Len Wein and Marv Wolfman

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THIS EVIL UNDYING

by JAMES SHOOTER

Tony Stark adjusted a rheostat and the milky-white lab windows began to clear. Outside, the floodlights were still keeping the darkness at bay, and for as far as Stark could see from his third-story vantage point, the grounds of Stark International were quiet.

One hundred yards away, across the well-tended lawn that insulated the Stark complex from its Long Island surroundings, two of his security men moved about their climate-controlled guardhouse. They were monitoring the electronic defense systems that protected the perimeter. In a minute, Stark knew, they'd log in an "all secure" and settle back with *The New York Times* for another hour.

Stark wondered whether all would remain secure for the next hour. The peril was real . . . the threat was imminent. Worse, it was all his fault.

He focused on his ghostly reflection barely visible in the polarized glass a foot from his face and saw accusation in the black phantom eyes staring back at him. No mercy. The accusation was firm. He should have anticipated, should have taken precautions and averted the crisis. He didn't. He failed.

Death for all mankind walked the Earth this night.

With a too-violent flick of the rheostat dial, Stark dispatched his accuser into matte-white oblivion. The room mellowed as the computer-controlled, indirect lights automatically compensated down, adjusting to the reflectivity of the once-again opaque window-walls.

Usually, the sublime efficiency of computers delighted Anthony Stark, especially when they were of his own design. For the past hour,

though, the notion of computer infallibility had been, frankly, terrifying.

An hour ago he had become aware of the existence of *Ultron.*

It was an awesome concept.

Somewhere out there existed an immensely powerful, virtually indestructible, sentient computer possessed of overwhelming *hatred* for things of flesh. It existed *again.* Because of Stark.

Start felt a chill race up his spine. He shivered.

Obligingly, the lab computer raised the temperature half a degree.

"Damn," Stark muttered.

With a great effort of will, he banished the weariness that had driven him to abandon his labors for the past few moments. He dared rest no longer. Ultron would not rest. Right *now,* he was preparing to strike. The end could begin in days—or in minutes.

He strode across the room toward a table upon which, in the midst of an array of microelectronic parts, rested a half-completed electronic device the size of a pocket calculator. As Stark sat down, a large magnifying lens, mounted on a swing arm, automatically positioned itself at the proper viewing distance between his eyes and his work. Out of spite for the computer. Stark manually adjusted the lens a fraction, putting it actually just a bit out of focus, and began again to microsolder circuit chips into place. The device was a weapon of sorts. It would be his *only* means of striking at Ultron, if the worst that he suspected was true. He hoped his device would cause a delay in Ultron's plans to enslave all flesh and blood. At the very least, perhaps it would create an *inconvenience* for Ultron. There would be a *price,* of course. Stark's death.

At the hands of a friend.

Stark looked out of place, hunched over a worktable, his fitted, white silk shirt; his expensive, black designer slacks; and his sun-bronzed skin suggesting more leisurely activities. But, then, Anthony Stark's appearance was misleading in many ways. He seemed too young, no older than his early thirties, to be the principal owner and chief executive of an industrial giant like Stark International. At six feet one, 195 solid pounds, he looked more like an athlete than an inventor, yet he held more than a hundred patents. His inventions had enabled him to build an empire from the small string of factories and machine shops he'd inherited from his father. Society columns characterized Tony Stark as a *playboy.* He often was seen with a variety of dazzlingly beautiful women in the most exclusive places, acting like a playboy. Certainly, with his strong handsome features, accented by a narrow black mustache, and his black hair, neatly trimmed, slightly wavy, he *looked* like a playboy. His steel-blue eyes,

however, gave him away. They were disturbingly deep, too thoughtful and wise for the face of a philanderer. They alone showed evidence of the fierce, relentless pace at which Stark worked and played.

"Time?" he said quietly without looking up from his work.

"Three thirty-seven and seventeen seconds, A.M." replied the computer, in a pleasant voice. Stark's own. The sound triggered the same reaction as the phantom eyes had. Stark's brow furrowed with the renewed weight of responsibility—and fear.

But then, Anthony Stark was a very responsible individual, and one quite accustomed to dealing with fear.

"Memo," Stark said, firmly.

"Ready," said the too-pleasant Stark-voiced computer.

"To Mrs. Donenfeld and the legal staff: Please reexamine and update my will as soon as possible. I'd like a report. Thank you, signed, Tony.

"Memo."

"Ready."

"To computer-maintenance staff: Please replace the goddamned voice tapes on the laboratory computer. I'm going crazy talking to myself. How about Liv Ullmann's voice or Catherine Deneuve's or Don Rickies'? Anybody's. Thank you, signed, Stark.

"End of memo."

It occurred to Stark that it was rather optimistic to be worrying about whose voice the lab computer had tomorrow, since there might not be a tomorrow.

He chuckled.

"Time?"

"Three thirty-nine and one second A.M."

"Coffee, please," Stark said, resolutely, adding with a sigh. "It's going to be a long night." The computer responded to the key words, "coffee, please," by delivering a steaming cup of Colombian Blue Mountain coffee from behind a sliding panel in the wall within his reach. It had no comment on its inventor's weary lament.

"Time?" said Stark through a yawn.

"Five-oh-seven and twelve seconds A.M."

Stark placed the product of his night's work into a small, steel carrying case, clicked the lid shut.

He stretched, yawned, and reached for his briefcase.

The briefcase looked ordinary, but under the leather finish it was armored with titanium. Carefully, Stark placed his thumb on a small blank panel cenr tered under the handle. A web of microcircuitry

inside the panel, reading the correct fingerprint pattern, responded by snapping open the twin vanadium-steel latches.

Stark lifted the lid, and unfastened the hidden latches to the case's cleverly constructed false bottom, raising that to expose several gold-and-crimson objects—oddly shaped, glistening—and fitted precisely into felt-lined spaces. He removed the objects one by one. The first two, entirely red, unfolded as he lifted them, taking on the appearance of flattened boots, segmented from the inch-thick flat soles, to midcalf. They were topped with thick cuffs three inches wide. They were *metallic,* and yet, as pliable as stiff cloth, and far too light to be made of any known metal. Laying the boots on the table, Stark next removed gauntlets of similar design from the case. A headpiece followed, red except for a faceplate which was golden, and slit with eye and mouth openings. Packed beneath these were trunks and tunic also red, also made of the pliable metallic substance. Last, Stark removed two circular pods, each approximately six inches in diameter, flat on one side, convex on the other. They were red, like most of the other gear, but were very solid metal, and as heavy as one would expect steel disks to be.

Having examined each piece, Stark quickly undressed, tossing his expensive clothes across a chair. Then, with routine ease, he donned the bulky tunic and trunks, boots and gauntlets. After fastening the circular power pods to couplings on each hip, he pressed a stud in his belt, and suddenly his hitherto-bare arms and legs were covered by a gleaming golden sheath of metal, which had sprung from the gauntlet and boot cuffs to seal magnetically against his trunks and tunic. Moreover, with the activation of the belt switch the appearance of all the parts of the costume had changed. What had apparently been thickened seams at the shoulders of the tunic had become inch-thick, inch-high reinforcing epaulets. A golden circle on the chest had gained dimension and become a built-in beacon. Clearly, the costume was metal, now. It looked hard. In fact, it had become *armor,* proof against the deadliest agents of destruction known to man, and yet somehow, impossibly, it was still flexible. Stark lifted the headpiece from the table and slipped it over his head. There was a soft click signifying its locking into place. As ionic energy from the pods surged into the headpiece, its unstable molecules polarized. metallicized, solidified. It became a *helmet,* the mouth and eye slits forming a grim visage belying the gentle face which had vanished beneath. And yet, for the first time this night, there was no mistake to be made about the man in this laboratory. For, in many ways, Anthony Stark, man of misleading images was *gone,* replaced by his creation—a modern knight, a deadly foe. a grim *Avenger.*

Once again, Iron Man lived.

Moving with amazing ease for an armored man, the striking crimson-and-gold figure crossed the room and picked up the metal case bearing his doom device. He looked toward the ceiling and very deliberately willed the skylight to open. Inside his helmet, a web of cybernetic circuitry, which controlled most of the armor's functions, received and interpreted the thought command, causing the transmitter built into the right gauntlet to emit an ultrahigh-frequency beep.

The remote-controlled skylight panel quickly, silently slid back revealing the cloudless, cobalt, predawn sky.

With another thought, Iron Man's powerful boot jets came to life, and his gleaming form surged upward, arcing into the dying night.

Janet Van Dyne Pym sat bolt upright in bed, awakened by a sudden lurching and an ear-splitting roar. It sounded as though the south wall of her large, comfortable, Cresskill, New Jersey, home had been ripped away all at once.

It had.

Out of habit she looked at the digital clock radio on the nightstand. It read 5:21. It was barely beginning to grow light outside.

She sighed, forcing her taut muscles to relax as she shifted her assessment of the situation from *earthquake* to *nightmare.* Leaning back slowly, wearily, she again settled into her satin-covered pillow. Almost immediately waves of sleep eroded the tension of a moment before, and oblivious peace enveloped her. After all, she was entirely unaccustomed to awakening before noon.

A noise like a cannon shot shattered the stillness as the house shook again.

Janet Pym's eyes snapped open wide.

It *was* real.

She threw the satin sheet aside and scrambled out of bed.

Smaller sounds of destruction rattled the house intermittently now. It was coming from the south wing.

Hank's lab?

She started toward the door, then stopped abruptly, remembering that she was naked. She reached for the chiffon robe lying across her vanity chair, then jerked her hand back, thinking better of wearing a filmy negligee.

It was Hank's favorite.

Why wasn't he *here?* Why did he have to be halfway around the world at a stupid symposium?

The crashing continued, louder now.

Closer?

She could feel the *power* behind each thunderous impact. Someone or *something* awesome was smashing her home.

Trembling, her hands raised to her brow, she lowered her head and closed her eyes, fighting the tide of clamoring, racing thoughts. Her breath came in nervous, shuddering gasps.

Gray light, heralding the approach of dawn, pervaded the room, painting everything in shades of despair. Janet Pym's soft fair skin looked wan and bloodless. Her slender but strong, supple limbs appeared fragile and brittle. Warm sensuality fled her enticingly rounded breasts and stirringly curved hips. Her body seemed cold and untouchable, an erotic sculpture in ice, a figure of eerie beauty, standing alone in a surreal chamber of bleak luxury and harsh comfort.

Just a door away from death.

She composed herself.

Calm now, though her heart was still pounding, she gathered clothing from a special section of her wardrobe and hurriedly began to dress.

Moments later, she slipped out into the hall clad in a formfitting, sleeveless, yellow body suit, made of a strange shimmering material. There were two vertical slits in the back, one over each shoulder blade. She wore boots that matched the body suit and pale-yellow tights. Around her neck there was a flat, featureless inch-wide metallic band.

Stealthily she crept down the thickly-carpeted hall.

As she passed a mirror, without pausing, or thinking, she fluffed her medium-length, deep brown, Sassooned hair.

It grew cold as Janet Pym approached the laboratory. A burning smell mingled with the dewy scent of morning air.

She peered cautiously through the open laboratory door.

The outer wall was gone. Tattered remnants of the insulation fluttered in the light breeze that was blowing through the jagged hole in the reinforced brick wall. Debris cluttered the floor. Fixtures were smashed, some were smoldering. Broken water pipes hissed and gurgled Hank's "impregnable" walk-in safe was open! The heavy door, battered and cracked, lay partially imbedded in the wall on the opposite side of the room.

She heard a scraping noise from inside the vault.

Janet edged out farther, trying to see inside the vault. It was dark. Something was moving around, but she couldn't make it out.

The visible proof of its destructive capacity settled the issue, however. First she would summon help—*powerful* help. And while help was on its way, she would continue scouting the enemy, cautiously, in a manner uniquely hers—and, well, Hank's too, but not as much so. Pleased with her plan, she pulled her head back from the doorway.

Too late.

A bolt of light lanced out from inside the vault, shattering the steel-reinforced wall behind which Janet Pym hid.

She screamed, tumbling backward as the wall vanished in a flash of searing heat and a shower of fragments.

Singed, bruised but still alive, she opened her eyes. Somewhere beyond the red haze obscuring her vision, a grotesque figure lumbered closer. She saw it, and dazedly watched it approach for a second or two before she realized the significance of what she saw.

It was coming to kill her.

It halted its advance at the ruined wall, staring down at her through the newly-burned hole.

Weak and dizzy, unable to do anything else, she simply stared back. It was a robot, an angular, ugly, gray-metal mockery of man. In its clawlike hands it held the fruits of its plundering: two fire-extinguisher-sized canisters, one orange, one green. She noticed the labels: "AD resin X" and "AD resin Y."

Gibberish.

Somewhere behind the robot's single, mechanical eye a decision was reached. A whirring sound drew her gaze to its chest, where a short-barreled weapon mounted in a ball turret angled down toward her.

She threw herself up to her knees, eyes wide with terror, and pointed the fingers of her right hand at the monster's eye. Every muscle in her lithe body tensed. She summoned all her will, all her might, and screaming, *she* struck first.

A searing bolt of pure energy surged from her fingertips. slamming the monster's metallic face with the fury of a thunderbolt. For a second, the brilliant flash again obscured Janet's vision.

Sight returned quickly this time, but she blinked in disbelief at what she saw.

The mechanical assassin stood unharmed, though her ricocheting bioelectric blast had obliterated another large piece of the lab wall.

It fired back.

And Janet Van Dyne Pym vanished.

The elegant mansion on Central Park West seemed to be drenched in blood as Iron Man plunged headlong toward it, the rising sun at his back. Swiveling his boot jets underneath his body at the last possible instant, he braked. His jets' pneumatic backwash rattled the windows as he landed with a clang on the front walk.

Seconds later, Iron Man strode silently down a plush-carpeted corridor.

"Good morning, sir," said a baritone voice with a bit of a British accent.

"Morning, Jarvis."

Iron Man turned to face the trim, balding, fiftyish figure emerging from the kitchen. Jarvis was straightening his tie, though it didn't need straightening. His attire was impeccable, as always. Jarvis believed that butlers should look "proper"—even at six A.M.

"I trust all is well with Mr. Stark, sir."

"Haven't seen him this morning, Jarvis. Did you summon the others?"

"The 'Avengers Assemble' signal went out less than a minute after your radio call awakened me, sir. The others will be joining you shortly, I'm sure, in the main conference room."

"Good," said Iron Man over his shoulder as he continued down the hall.

"Marmalade on your muffin, sir?"

Iron Man stopped.

"Jarvis, the world as we know it is teetering on the brink of chaos. Our last moments may be at hand—and you ask me if I want *marmalade on my muffin?"*

"Ah! My apologies, sir! Would the Swiss strawberry preserves I've been saving be acceptable?"

"Much better, Jarv. And a side of machine oil for me, huh?"

The curtains were open and the conference room was awash in the morning's warm glow. In the center of the room, seven modernesque white chairs, each emblazoned with a symbol representing an Avenger, surrounded a round white table. A golden, block-letter "A," outlined in black, adorned the table top.

Iron Man stood alone in the room, looking out the window. He wondered what time it had gotten to be.

Catching the interrogative key word "time," the cybernetic web in his helmet flashed "6:09 A.M." on a tiny LED display on the edge of his eye slit.

Iron Man noticed, grunting, all at once resentful of his own computer's incredible efficiency and relieved that it was earlier than he thought. Moments were precious.

Something made him turn.

The ceiling was growing ghostly legs.

Thev were nearly transparent. Iron Man could just barely see them: yellow-booted, green-clad legs slowly emerging from the solid substance of the ceiling. Yellow trunks, then the green-clad torso of a slim-but-powerful male figure followed. The tall figure stood erect, motionless, except for its slow descent. At last the green-hooded head appeared, a long, yellow cape drifting indifferently behind it.

The face was narrow, angular, grim, and stoic. The eyes blazed from within their dark chasms. At the brow, a yellow jewel glistened.

Settling to the floor, the figure began to solidify, and the color of its skin, which showed only at its face, became apparent. It was brilliant blood-red.

"Morning, Vision," Iron Man said. "You know, no matter how many times I see that trick, it still unnerves me. Where's the Witch?"

Iron Man meant, of course, the Scarlet Witch—the Vision's wife and a fellow Avenger.

"Wanda was about to leave our chambers upstairs when I began my descent. She will arrive in approximately thirty-five seconds."

The Vision's voice was cold, hollow, and nearly devoid of inflection.

Thirty-five seconds later, the Scarlet Witch walked into the room. As usual, when the Witch entered his presence, the man inside the gold-and-crimson armor suppressed a sigh of admiration—and lust. The face of Iron Man betrayed nothing, however.

"Are you well. Iron Man?" Wanda spoke softly, always with great dignity and sincerity. She had the merest hint of a Balkan accent, which laced her speech with exotic undertones.

"Fine," said Iron Man, careful not to let his gaze dwell too long on her handsome body. She was tall, almost five feet ten, and devastatingly voluptuous; the kind of woman whose every movement evokes male fascination—a symphony of sensual curves. She wore what resembled a one-piece strapless bathing suit, wine red and formfitting, over a lavender-red body stocking. Low-heeled boots, long gloves, and a full, flowing cape, all wine red, completed her attire. Her long, wavy auburn tresses spilled down over her shoulders, framing her face. Nobility showed in the high arch of her brows, her long lashes and her delicately sculpted nose. Her lips were dark and full. There was a softness in her features that bespoke compassion, and yet, somehow, disturbingly, the potential for coldness, even cruelty, was

evident in her sea-green eyes. They met Iron Man's.

Something clicked in Iron Man's brain. Something violent, something deadly, possessed him. His muscles tensed, stiffened, as if to spring.

"No. Not yet."

It passed. A chill raced down Iron Man's spine as he abruptly became aware again. He felt like a late-night motorist roaring down a dark highway, suddenly awakening, terrified to find that he had nodded off at the wheel for . . . a second? Two? Five?

"Not yet . . . what?" Wanda inquired.

"What?" said Iron Man. He remembered nothing save that a vague, troubling thought had rumbled through his mind beneath the level of consciousness.

"Are you all right, Iron Man?" the Vision asked. There was no concern evident in his hollow, robotic voice.

"Just tired." Iron Man involuntarily wondered at the oddity before him. What was this dazzling sensual beauty doing married to this machinelike man? . . . or was it a manlike machine? He was a *synthezoid*—an artificial, solar-powered being, a melding of chemically synthesized organs with computer circuitry. A . . . *thing!* He . . . *it* arrived at its version of feelings through binary logic. And then, it was virtually incapable of expressing emotion, much less *passion!* She, on the other hand . . . ! He had known lesser women somewhat like her. She would be a raging *volcano* of passion. She was the kind of woman . . .

The man in the armor stopped himself there.

He shuddered at how easily he had lapsed into prejudicial self-justification. Was it jealousy? Fear?

This morning, all things computerlike bore a sinister association. Even his *ally,* the Vision.

His friend.

With cooler eyes, he looked at Wanda and realized the irony in his attack of prejudice. She was also a victim of man's hatred and injustice.

She was a mutant. A *Homo superior,* born with an extra ability denied mere mortals. Hers was the power to alter probability, to *change the odds* of an event's occurrence. She could simply point, casting a *hex,* and cause the improbable to become imminent. With a casual gesture she could make the chandelier fall, or the chair leg break. Science could not explain it. Men called it sorcery, and perhaps it was. Or, perhaps, it was simply science beyond human ken.

It didn't matter. She was different, and humans had made her suffer

because of it. She had seen much cruelty.

No wonder a trace of it remained in her eyes. No wonder she sought out another outcast with whom to share life.

After all, she *was* what they called her: a *witch,* something more than human, and therefore, *inhuman.*

Perhaps, then, she was not so unlike the Vision.

Perhaps no man could understand her inhuman passions save one beyond human passions.

The man in the armor again held back a sigh as Wanda lovingly took the Vision's hand. Together, they sat down at the table.

A noise in the hallway outside the meeting room caught Iron Man's attention. A second later The Noise burst into the room.

"Hey, there, friends an' neighbors, make way for the heavyweight bow-an'-arrow cham-peen of the universe!"

"Not to mention the biggest blowhard," said a deeper, and far less brassy voice behind The Noise.

"I was gonna introduce *you* in a minute, Grampa, but first, me! Heee-errre's *Hawkeye!* Ta-Taa!"

Hawkeye posed with his arms raised. Captain America stepped around him and calmly walked to his seat. Even in that simple action he evoked awe.

He stood six feet two, and was an absolutely perfect specimen, every muscle in his body developed to its ultimate potential, in perfect balance with its counterposed muscles. Every movement he made was carelessly precise, pantherlike, a study of implied power and subtle grace.

He wore red gloves and red boots. His snug-fitting pants and trunks were blue. On his lower torso, broad, vertical red-and-white stripes adorned his shirt. Over the striped cloth shirt he wore a short-sleeved half shirt of blue chain mail complete with a hood which covered his head and the upper half of his face. Centered on the front and back of the mail shirt were large, white stars. On the front of the headpiece, a white letter "A" was emblazoned, and on the sides, above the ears, small wings were affixed. The white cloth sleeves of his undershirt covered his arms. He carried a circular shield with a white star on a blue field in its center ringed bv red and white stripes.

Cap rested his shield beside his chair and sat erect, his attention on Iron Man.

Hawkeye, having strutted to the table behind Cap, slung his quiver of arrows and his huge double recurved bow across one of the two vacant chairs beside his. Then, he slid his chair back, sat down and leaned back, purple-booted feet crossed at the ankles and resting on

the tabletop.

“Hawkeye, must you behave like a schoolchild?” Wanda asked, but without real disapprobation in her tone.

“Hey, I ain’t got no couth! What can I tell ya?” Hawkeye retorted.

Hawkeye pulled back the purple hood which covered the upper part of his face and his head. He was blond, and to his everlasting chagrin, he looked more than a little like Captain America did under *his* mask, at least at first glance. To everyone but Hawkeye, the similarities dissolved at second glance. Where Cap was a ruggedly handsome, firm-jawed solid-looking man whose deep principles showed in his face, Hawkeye was the devil himself. He was *wickedly* handsome, with an air of carnival decadence about him left over from his years as a big-top performer. The costume he wore was also a memento from the years he spent performing as *Hawkeye, the World’s Greatest Archer*. It consisted of a form-fitting midnight-blue tunic, ornamented in purple, which split into a loincloth below his purple belt. Underneath the loincloth he wore tight midnight-blue breeches. His arms were bare except for purple metallic arm bands and wrist braces.

It was clear from those muscular sun-bronzed arms that Hawkeye was a man of unusual strength. No ordinary man could even string his powerful bow, much less bend it.

Still, he wasn’t quite the physical phenomenon that Captain America was. *That* irritated him even more than the superficial facial resemblance.

“Anybody got a deck of cards?” Hawkeye said, yawning broadly.

“At ease, Barton,” Cap snapped. “We’re still missing two members.”

“But we dare not wait any longer,” Iron Man said. He had resumed his vigil at the picture window, but now he turned and stood facing the seated Avengers, silhouetted by the morning light at his back.

“As current chairman, I hereby call to order this council. I won’t waste any more time with formalities.

“I have reason to believe that *Ultron* has been recreated . . . and even now is preparing to str—”

The shattering of glass drowned out Iron Man’s words as the window exploded inward. Shards of crystal death sliced the sun’s golden rays into flashes of brilliance as they cascaded over Iron Man, only to splinter and sliver further against his armor.

Before the first fragment of glass spilled past Iron Man, Captain America had scooped up his shield and in one fluid movement, leaped across the table to intercept the deadly fusillade, protecting the Avengers behind him.

Hawkeye fumbled for his bow and quiver.

On the far side of the table, the Vision sprang to his feet, almost as swiftly as Cap, and spread his cape between Wanda and the razor-sharp shards, willing his body and costume to increase in density until both had reached the consistency of steel. The few flying fragments to elude Cap's shield did not shred supple cloth or vulnerable flesh, but instead clattered harmlessly away. The Witch had already instinctively covered her eyes and face with her own cloak.

The explosion of glass ceased.

"Hawkeye! Cover the window!" Iron Man shouted.

By this time Hawkeye had nocked and pulled an arrow with an explosive warhead tip. At Iron Man's command, he trained his bow on the broken window. The roguish glint in his eye had gone deadly cold.

"Witch! The door! Vizh! Check out the area!"

The Witch emerged from behind the Vision as the last glass bits rattled down. She faced the door, arms raised, her fingers pointed like weapons. Deep within, she fondled a mental trigger for the awesome energies coursing through her mutant body.

Cap had flattened against the wall by the window. Iron Man stood ready on the opposite side.

The Vision heard it first.

A groan. Then a weak, nearly inaudible cry.

"Help me!"

"What the hell are you waiting for, Vision? I said *recon!"* Iron Man hissed.

Captain America heard it too. "Hold it, Iron Man. There's something . . ."

The Vision knelt among the fragments of the shattered window, staring at the floor. He saw her.

Then they all saw her—a tiny woman, no larger than an ant. A *winged* woman.

She was growing.

"Hawkeye, give me your sharpest pointed arrow," the Vision said without looking up. Mystified, Hawkeye nonetheless complied.

With machinelike precision, the Android Avenger used the arrow tip to flick tiny razor-sharp splinters of glass away from the miniature, growing figure.

Seconds later, when she had become a teaspoonful, the Vision gently picked her up and held her limp body in his palm. The Avengers gathered around.

Wanda cleared the table of glass and they laid her there, still growing.

A minute later she reached full size. The insectlike wings had diminished as she had grown. No trace of them remained, save for the two narrow slits in her tattered yellow body suit, over her shoulder blades from which the wings had protruded.

"Wasp! Are you hurt? What happened?" Iron Man asked urgently.

"I'm okay . . . robot tried to kill me . . ."

"Ultron?"

"No . . . but strong . . . couldn't hurt it. It wrecked my house! My beautiful house . . . Hank's whole lab! He'll kill me!"

"I doubt it, Jan," Cap said, smiling. "Go on."

"It almost . . . fried me, but I shrunk down to wasp size . . . and scooted out of the way . . . well, almost. Fringe of the blast . . . caught me. Oh-h. My hair is ruined!

"I pulled myself together . . . and flew here . . . fast as I could.

"Sorry about the window . . . Iron Man. So tired. My wings hurt. I started to black out . . . saw I was plunging toward the glass . . . used my *sting* . . ."

"Lady, if you can get together enough bioelectric energy to do *that* to a thermopane window when you're blacking out, I'd hate to see you when you're in fighting fettle," Iron Man chuckled.

With help from the Vision and Captain America, the Wasp sat up.

"Nothing feels broken. I guess I'll be all right. But, you know, I could get used to all you hunky guys fussing over me. Hank always says I'm . . ."

A faint sound, a soft, metallic clanking silenced the Wasp. The Avengers turned as one toward the source.

It was outside, in the hall, advancing toward the closed meeting-room doors.

In the space of a heartbeat the Avengers stood ready for battle.

"Let the monster stand revealed!" Wanda cried, gesturing dramatically toward the heavy mahogany doors.

With a thunderous crash, they fell from their hinges, split into kindling.

Jarvis' eyes widened momentarily as the doors loudly disintegrated in front of him, and doubtless wondered why the Avengers were poised to obliterate their trusted butler. However, undaunted, he calmly rolled his tea cart through the wreckage into the room.

"Breakfast is served."

Breakfast got cold while Wanda and Jarvis dressed the Wasp's minor wounds, and Iron Man boarded the broken window. Then, as Jarvis

served the coffee, the Wasp recounted in detail the story of the attack on her home.

"You say the robot was carrying something when he tried to kill you?" Iron Man asked.

"Yes. Two cylinder-thingies, about as big as . . . golf bags. Something was written on them—I can't remember what."

"Try, Jan. It may be important," said Iron Man.

"Hmm. Well, I remember what colors they were. Who could forget? One was that same yuckie green that *Moondragon* wears. Honestly, that woman has less taste than she has hair! And the other was a garish orange just like that little car Tony Stark drives sometimes—is it a Ferrari? Iron Man, you ought to tell him how *gauche* that color is. And that could be such a cute little car!"

"Uh, right. Could the inscriptions on the cylinders have been 'AD resin X' and 'AD resin Y,' Jan?"

"Yes, I think so, Iron Man. Does it matter?"

"It may be the best news I've had all day. It gives us a clue to Ultron's plans.

"AD resin X and AD resin Y are metallic resins which combine under certain conditions to form a metal called *Adamantium.* As you know, Adamantium is virtually indestructible. No power known to man has any significant effect on pure Adamantium.

"And Ultron is constructed of pure Adamantium."

"Hey, pardon my ignorance, Rustpot," Hawkeye interrupted, "but how the hell do you build something out of a metal that can't be worked? If it's indestructible, you can't melt it, or roll it, or drill it. Seems to me all you could make out of the stuff is free-form paper weights."

"Good question. The fact is that after the resins are mixed, there is a flux period during which the Adamantium is liquid. If the temperature is kept in excess of 15,000°C, the metal will remain in a fluid state for about eight minutes. During that time it can be cast and shaped by ionic-field manipulation."

Hawkeye yawned loudly, leaned back, and rested his feet on the table once again.

Patiently, Iron Man continued. "After Adamantium solidifies, it is utterly immutable. A plate one quarter of an inch thick could survive a direct hit by a hydrogen bomb. I doubt if it would be scratched."

"Hmmph," Hawkeye grunted, looking bored. Taking an arrow from his quiver, he reached across the table with it, spearing the last English muffin on the serving plate.

"Y'know," he said, his mouth full of muffin, "this Ultron dude

sounds tough. I think we ought to surrender."

"Hawkeye!" the Witch half shouted. Her tone was rather like that of a parent scandalized by her child's behavior.

"Yeth, Mommy?" Hawkeye squeaked, mocking her.

"Address my wife with *respect,* Archer," the Vision said, with more venom in his hollow voice than Iron Man had thought possible, "or I shall . . ."

Hawkeye stuck out his tongue and crossed his eyes.

"Enough!" Captain America shouted, slapping Hawkeye's feet off the table hard enough to tip him over backward in his chair. The chair crashed to the floor but Hawkeye nimbly back-flipped and landed on his feet. By that time Cap was also standing, shield in hand. Hawkeye still held the arrow he'd used to stab the muffin.

"Put the shield down," said the Brash Attacker, dropping his razor-pointed arrow.

The Resolute Defender tossed his shield aside, never taking his eyes off Hawkeye. The shield landed gently in a cushioned chair across the room.

Hawkeye leaped at Cap.

In midair, a yellowish beam of repellent force intercepted him, gently stealing his momentum. He hung motionless in space for a split second, then crashed awkwardly to the ground.

"Ow-w!"

"Hawkeye," Iron Man said, adjusting the repulsor beam in his palm back up to its normal high-impact setting, "Can't you get it through your head that this isn't recess? We're facing the greatest crisis we've . . ."

"Bull!" Hawkeye shouted, pulling himself to his feet. "What's *wrong* with you people? So there's a robot running around loose—*big deal!* Why are we sitting here moping about how tough he is? Is this the Campfire Girls or the Avengers? Hey, I got an idea! Let's go find that mother and do some *avenging!"*

"Just like that, huh?" said Iron Man.

"Sure. After all, if it wasn't for us—*some* of us—there wouldn't be an Ultron, would there?"

The armored man's eyes widened. Did Hawkeye *know?*

The Wasp leaped to her feet, tears welling in her eyes. She hissed, "Damn you, Hawkeye! That's *cruel!* When Hank created the first Ultron, he didn't mean to create a monster! He just wanted to make a machine that could think on its own!"

"And he succeeded," the Vision added, "too well. The first Ultron

carried on the creative process that Henry Pym had merely begun . . .”

“A real self-made robot,” Hawkeye said dryly.

“Self-transformed,” the Vision corrected. “Dr. Pym intended his thinking computer to devise ways to end hardship and turmoil in the world. With twisted logic, Ultron concluded that living beings are the cause of disorder; ergo he remade himself into an invincible engine of destruction, seeking to fulfill his prime directive by destroying all life.”

“But we smashed the first Ultron, and a couple more since,” Hawkeye said. “Who keeps putting the damn thing back together?”

“Uh, I believe that this time it was a technician, a scientist at Stark International. I deduced that from certain materials which were missing from our vaults. Apparently, this, uh, person was operating under a powerful posthypnotic suggestion planted by Ultron the last time he existed,” Iron Man explained. “Ultron is a computer. He plans for every conceivable contingency, even the unlikely event of his own destruction.”

“Do you know who this techno was?” Hawkeye asked.

“I have my suspicions,” Iron Man said, “but it doesn’t matter . . .” In his mind he added “. . . yet.”

“The individual involved remembers nothing. He wouldn’t be any help to us.”

“I have a question, Iron Man,” Cap said. “You mentioned guessing Ultron’s plans . . .”

“There are any number of ways that Ultron could destroy humanity. For instance, he could single-handedly seize a nuclear missile complex —who could stop him? And start an atomic holocaust that only he could survive.

“Instead, from what Jan told us, he has created at least one Adamantium drone robot. And he sent that robot to Jan’s house, apparently to steal the makings of more Adamantium from Hank’s lab. I figure that he intends to build more drones, until he has an *army* of invincible slaves. His robot lackeys are probably striking all around the world, stealing priceless Adamantium resins from every major stockpile.”

“Quite right, sir,” said Jarvis, entering with a teletype printout in hand. “This just came in from the Pentagon on the top-secret wire.”

“Hmmm,” Iron Man said, reading the tape. “Last night, Utron’s drone invaded Project Prometheus, out in the Adirondacks . . . heavy casualties . . . destroyed a dozen tanks and seven aircraft . . . and made off with the second largest supply of Adamantium resin in the Free World.”

Hawkeye slumped into his chair. “How many robots could he make outta that?”

“I’d estimate . . . two,” Iron Man said.

“Two? Just *two?!”*

“Hawkeye, all the Adamantium resin existing in the world today would barely fill a large closet . . . or your mouth. It’s in dribs and drabs all over the world. That’s why it’s to our advantage if Ultron is intent on seizing it. It’ll *take* him awhile . . . and maybe give us time to find him . . . and destroy him.”

“The problem is *how,”* Captain America said, stroking his cleft chin. “Hawkeye is fond of pointing out that we’ve smashed Ultron before, but . . .”

“But in fact,” Iron Man interjected, “we managed to *trick* the first incarnations of Ultron into destroying *themselves.* We were physically helpless against them.”

“It is not likely that Ultron will fall to trickery again,” the Vision said.

“All of our power—all of the power in the world—is useless against him. There is only one thing, one weapon that can harm him.” Iron Man paused dramatically. “A *Molecular Rearranger.”*

“Where do we *get* one, Tin Man? Can our local mad genius, Tony Stark, whip one up before lunch?”

“Not likely, Hawkeye. The Molecular Rearranger was created by Doctor Myron MacLain, the same scientist who first produced Adamantium. MacLain died of a stroke shortly afterward. The secret of the Rearranger died with him.

“All we know is that it works on principles of subatomics that the greatest nuclear physicists alive today can’t fathom. And that it can reshape Adamantium as if it were Silly Putty.

“The only existing prototype MR device was stolen by Ultron years ago.”

“Correct, Iron Man,” said the Vision. “So that he would possess the ability to alter his Adamantium body if he chose, he incorporated the device into his internal circuitry.”

“Beyond our reach,” Hawkeye said, ruefully.

“Not beyond mine.”

The Scarlet Witch stepped forward. “You were not there when last we battled Ultron, Hawkeye. My hex power caused short circuits inside his body. The rearranging device Iron Man spoke of malfunctioned, creating rifts in his impregnable metal skin.

“And thus, for the first time we were truly able to defeat the monster in battle!”

“Then we can do it *again.* Jeez, that’s what I said at the beginning of this.”

“Maybe we can do it again. Ultron obviously knows that he’s got a built-in Achilles heel, which is why, I suspect, he’s laying low and letting *drones* do his dirty work. He won’t feel safe until the one person who’s a danger to him . . . is eliminated.”

All eyes converged on the Scarlet Witch. Protectively, the Vision placed his arm around her. Wanda, however, looked serene and unafraid.

“Our strategy seems clear, then,” Cap said on the heels of a long pause. “While we’re searching for Ultron, we’ve got to protect the Witch as if the world depended on it.”

“ ’Cause it does,” Hawkeye added.

The setting sun worked a multicolored miracle behind the Manhattan skyline. From their balcony, Wanda and the Vision watched, their arms about one another.

“So beautiful,” said Wanda, half whispering. “I have never seen the like, darling. Do you think it is meant to inspire us?”

“I believe that it is the result of the unique refractive qualities of the various airborne pollutants present in this vicinity,” the Vision said matter-of-factly.

“Cold-blooded bastard!” Wanda hissed, twisting and pushing to escape his arms, with little success.

“You,” he said in deliberate, measured tones, “are beautiful when you are angry.”

“The result of having fire in my blood! Not antifreeze! Let go of me!”

“Never,” he said, kissing her. “Iron Man has ordered me to remain at your side. Therefore, it is my duty as an Avenger to hold you.

“You will be pleased to know that I have calculated the refractional indices for the chemical components of the smog. I will now list them for you.”

“You do and I’ll hex you into plastic slag!” Wanda said through clenched teeth as she struggled.

The Vision kissed her again and her struggles lessened. She resisted for only a moment, then her lips parted, her mouth opened, and, passionately, she kissed back.

He gently, effortlessly swept her off her feet and carried her across the threshold, closing the curtained French doors behind them.

The sunset, perhaps their last, had indeed inspired them.

“It’s like looking at a Rembrandt in a smelly sewer!” the Wasp said, wrinkling her nose.

She stood at the open door to the terrace, looking out at the spectacular display in the western sky. Behind her, in the drawing room, Hawkeye was sprawled on a crushed-velvet couch watching an *Odd Couple* rerun.

“What?”

“I said the sky is lovely but the air is yuckie!”

“Oh. I thought that was your perfume, ‘Essence of New Jersey.’ ”

“My perfume,” Jan huffed, affecting an aristocratic tone, “is *‘Bal à Versailles’* And *you,”* she said, switching to a catty hiss, “are a slimy mugwump.”

With that she disappeared.

Moments later, in the huge basement gymnasium, the Wasp delicately landed on Captain America’s shoulder. To her, Cap’s chain-mail shirt seemed to be a vast, deep-blue, rolling plain made of regular, overlapping, circular scales, each almost half her size. Cap stood holding his shield by the edge, taking careful aim at a practice dummy across the room. He drew a deep breath, and threw. The Wasp clung desperately as steel-band shoulder sinews surged and rippled beneath the mail shirt.

The shield arced far wide of the target, toward a heavy metal weight rack. Clanging loudly on impact, it ricocheted, leaping as though it were alive toward the parallel bars, only to ricochet again from a steel upright, finally thumping solidly into the back of the padded dummy. Its momentum still unexpended, it bounced high into the air.

As his shield struck its mark, Captain America launched himself forward, spring off a horse into the air, catching the spinning disk at the top of its rebound. Gracefully, he somersaulted down, landing in a ready crouch.

“Wheee! Do it again!”

“Wasp?” Cap said, turning toward the tiny voice.

“Here I am,” she said, growing a few centimeters to become more visible. “Boy, are you a cinch to sneak up on when you’re concentrating!” She laughed.

Cap looked deadly serious. “Hmm. I’ll have to remember that. How long have you been on my shoulder?”

“Who can keep track of time sitting on such a sexy, muscular shoulder?”

Cap hadn't had time to "hmmph" before the Wasp was standing beside him full size, tears welling in her eyes.

"Oh, what's the use of flirting? Hank isn't here to get jealous! Cap, I'm so worried. What if I never get to see him again?"

Cap pulled his hood back, and raised the Wasp's chin gently with his hand, until her wet eyes met his, full of understanding and paternal tenderness.

"Janet . . ."

"No, Cap," she said, sniffling, "you don't have to say it. I know I'm being dumb. Everybody's favorite air-head heiress strikes again.

"I know Hank will get our cable and rush right back here from Japan . . . but that may take *two days!* What if . . . what if we're all . . .

"Oh, fudge!"

She sniffed again. "I wish I had a kleenex . . . or you had a cape! I . . . I guess it's just this waiting that's getting me."

"Me too, Ladybug," said Hawkeye, strutting through the doorway. "I just heard on the news that Ultron's Adamantium stooge just raided a British military-research complex. He made off with 'certain secret materials' and, while he was at it, *wiped out* a tank battalion."

"Wiped out . . . ?" Cap stammered.

"Yeah. As in dead. They say this thing is getting real cocky . . . not making any attempt to cover its tracks. It dropped out of sight for awhile, I guess to ditch the loot. Then it was sighted again heading toward France. The French Army is mobilizing—and us Avenger types are just sitting here."

"Protecting the Witch!" Cap said, with an edge on his voice. "I'm sure Ultron *wants* us to go after his stooge. Tell me, Barton, should we take Wanda with us and risk getting her killed, or leave her here and let Ultron pick her off at his leisure?"

For once Hawkeye said nothing.

"Iron Man is trying to find Ultron with his electronic gadgets," Cap continued, "When he does . . ."

"When he does, call me," said the Wasp, turning toward the door. "I'm going home."

"Jan, wait! You can't . . ."

"Yes, I can, Cap! We're not 'protecting' Wanda! That stubborn, arrogant woman won't let us near her! I guess she thinks she's proving how brave and self-reliant she is. She's just *barely* tolerating having her husband stay at her side. Lord knows if it was me, you'd all have to take turns hiding me in your pockets." Janet paused as if a thought had just struck her. Banishing a quick half-smile, she resumed her impassioned tirade. "Anyway, my house is a wreck! I've got to go take

care of it—and my *hair!* I simply must do something about these frizzled ends before I'm seen in public! Look, I'm only twenty minutes away if you need me, and well, you'll probably be better off *without* a dummy like me. It's not as if I were *Thor,* you know."

With that, she struck a flirtatious pinup-girl pose, and, smiling impishly, shrank out of sight.

"Where the hell is Thor?" Iron Man said out loud. He was alone in the mansion's sprawling laboratory, standing before an array of gauges and dials mounted on a panel in the wall. He had spent the day applying the lab's sensors and computers to the task of locating Ultron. He had monitored high-frequency communication bands, hoping to pick up transmissions between Ultron and his robot cat's-paw. He had scanned for unusual concentrations of energy and radioactivity. He had even microanalyzed infrared satellite photographs of the entire Western Hemisphere hoping to detect evidence of underground construction that might pinpoint a hidden base. He had found nothing.

But now he was more worried about the whereabouts of his ally. For the thousandth time he picked up the phone and dialed an unlisted, unpublished number known only to him, and for the thousandth time, he heard it ring—tinny, echoing, endless rings. Dr. Donald Blake, Thor's mortal persona, apparently, was not in.

He hung up.

There was a chair near the phone. He slumped into it, and, unlocking a hidden magnetic catch, flipped up the faceplate of his helmet. The man in the armor was worried.

"Memo" he said.

The mansion's lab computer, like its counterpart at Tony Stark's factory lab, responded to that key word in Stark's own voice.

"Ready."

The man in the armor drew a long breath, then began.

"I've got to say everything out loud . . . clarify my thoughts.

"First, I'm almost certain that I'm the one who reconstructed Ultron.

"These are the facts: there may be a dozen people in the world who have the technical skill to put together a device as complicated as Ultron. Fewer still have fairly easy access to the necessary materials—Hank Pym, Reed Richards, Doctor Doom, of course, and me.

"The 'necessary materials,' including some top-secret components that only I have access to, are missing from Stark International's supply vaults. Also, there are gaps in my memory during the last month—'missing' hours and days, when I don't know where I was or

what I was doing.

"Apparently, I was rebuilding Ultron . . . at least to the point that he could complete himself.

"I must have been under some sort of post-hypnotic suggestion. I figure that, in his last incarnation. Ultron captured me, as Tony Stark, planted his orders and his design in my mind, and then let me go, physically unharmed. I was his ace in the hole, his ticket to reincarnation.

"I should have *foreseen* this. I should have taken steps to prevent it. But it's done now. I don't have time to wallow in guilt. I'll do that later . . . if there is a later.

"What worries me is that I may *still* be subject to Ultron's control.

"I haven't been able to determine the type of hypnosis or mind control Ultron subjected me to. I've given myself every conceivable test, tried every antihypnotic technique, but I haven't been able to 'unlock' the memories of my 'missing hours,' nor, I suspect, have I eliminated any additional hypnotic programming. Whatever method of superhypnosis Ultron used, it's powerful stuff, light years beyond ordinary hypnosis.

"I know damned well that no sleepwalker could construct an Ultron. My guess is that Ultron's mind control somehow alters an individual's frame of reference—changes a few of the 'givens' and principles fundamental to his reasoning, and thereby twists his sense of right and wrong. It makes you think you desperately *want* to do whatever the programmer says, because you think it's *right*.

"That means that the affected individual can 'freelance.' He isn't bound by rigid, step-by-step orders. He can devote all of his creative faculties toward accomplishing whatever goal has been set for him.

"And in my case, that makes for a very dangerous situation. If I should fall under Ultron's power again, it's possible that I could end up serving him . . . as *Iron Man.*"

The armored man's voice trailed off. He looked at his clenched, armored fist and tried to imagine fighting willingly, fervently at Ultron's side against the Avengers. A wave of revulsion swept through him.

And yet, had he not recreated Ultron? Most likely filled with righteous fervor all the while.

He trembled.

"At any rate, I have considered possible solutions:

"First, I had planned to tell all this to Thor. I trust him above anyone. He alone of the Avengers knows that Tony Stark is Iron Man, and I would have been able to tell him the whole story without

compromising my privacy.

"He is also, perhaps, the only Avenger capable of surviving an all-out surprise attack by me . . . and the only one powerful enough to have a decisive edge in battle against me.

"I planned to put my life in his hands, to leave it to his judgment, whether or not at any point I was truly myself, or in Ultron's sway. Except maybe for Jarvis, Thor knows me better than anyone. He would be the first to sense it, if I had gone over. And he, above all, could be counted upon to do his sworn duty, no matter how repugnant.

"Even to slaying a friend.

"Just in case I tried *running* from Thor, last night I constructed a *tracer,* attuned to my armor, which is capable of locating me anywhere on this planet. It's sealed in the subbasement vault, which is *fused shut* well enough so that it would take *me* a day to blast it open. Thor could reach the tracer a good bit quicker, I'm sure, and use it to track me down if necessary.

"There's only one thing wrong with this elaborate plan. Thor never showed. So I am pondering alternatives.

"There's always suicide. Right now. That would eliminate the possibility of Iron Man becoming a threat. Or perhaps Tony Stark could simply be locked up in a maximum security cell somewhere far away from Iron Man's armor.

"That sounds good. Except that it eliminates me from the war against Ultron . . . and in all modesty, against that invulnerable monstrosity, the Avengers *need* the power of Iron Man . . . especially since Thor isn't with us.

"There isn't time to find and train someone else to use my armor, either.

"Maybe I should confide in Cap . . . or the Vision. Or even Jarvis. Or . . . in all the Avengers, together. My 'privacy' somehow seems unimportant now.

"But anyone I confided in would become the first target of a renegade Iron Man. And how could they follow me into battle and fight at my side, while fearing *me* as much as Ultron. Suspicion . . . division in our ranks . . . hesitation could kill us all.

"Maybe *needlessly.* This is all speculation on my part. I doubt that Ultron could be aware that I'm both Stark and Iron Man. It is very likely he saw no further use for me after I reconstructed him. I don't know, or even have reason to suspect that Ultron has implanted any further programming in my brain.

"But it would be just like that son of a bitch to have done it."

The man in the armor stood and slowly, wearily, stroked his chin and pondered for a moment. “Signed, Stark,” he said, finally.

“End of memo. Print one copy, seal it with a numbered Avenger’s seal, in an envelope marked ‘Top Secret.’ Address: Thor, then . . . erase the tape.”

Moments later, Jarvis jumped out of his Barca Lounger in response to a heavy thumping on his door. Though it was long after his official hours, he still wore his vest and bow tie. On the way to the door he almost stopped to put on his jacket, then deferred to the urgency in the knocking.

It was Iron Man.

“Sir?”

“Jarvis,” Iron Man said quietly, gravely, “I’m sorry to bother you, but I need your help.” He held up a white letter-size envelope addressed to Thor and imprinted in red “Top Secret.”

“Give this to Thor the moment he arrives here.”

Jarvis took the envelope. “Certainly, sir, but . . .”

“There’s more to this, Jarv, and it’s important, so listen carefully.

“As long as you hold this note, your life is in danger. I can’t explain it, Jarvis, but . . . *I* may try . . . to kill you . . . to prevent you from delivering this message.”

“Y-you, sir?”

“Yes. Jarvis . . . if I should do anything *unusual* . . . or . . . if you just sense that I’m not myself . . . or, if God forbid, I *attack* you . . . then forget about Thor. Do whatever you must to get this message into the hands of *any* Avenger. But under *no circumstances* let it be destroyed or give it *back* to me. Understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good,” Iron Man said, turning away. “I knew I could count on you.”

“Of course, sir. Good night.” Jarvis closed his door and leaned against it, holding the dreadful letter with a shaking hand, eyes wide, cold sweat beading on his forehead. He loosened his tie, and opened his collar, and quietly contemplated playing keep-away against an armored titan who could twist steel beams into pretzels.

The Vision stood at the foot of the bed staring at Wanda. She had gotten dressed again, as had he, except for her cape, boots, and gloves. She lay propped up on two plump pillows, reading Gide’s *The Immoralist.*

“Are you going to stand there staring at me all night?” she asked

without looking up.

"Occasionally I shall look out the window," he replied. "You are very lucky that I require no sleep, or else you would have had all of us in this room with you two by two in shifts all night. Remember, Iron Man was reluctant to consent to my being your sole bodyguard."

"If I am the one Ultron fears, perhaps then I should be guarding all of you!" the Witch said with a hint of imperial disdain in her voice. She rose and stood erect, her arms folded under her bosom and her head tilted haughtily back. "What if I choose to go for a midnight stroll in the garden . . . alone?"

"You shall not pass," the Vision said, his hollow monotone somehow conveying ironclad resoluteness.

"Hmm," the Witch said, suddenly coy. "So dutiful!" She undid the clasp at the back of her body suit and pulled it down exposing one supple shoulder. "Maybe the poor, imprisoned Witch can *tempt* her cruel jailer. Maybe he can be *bribed!"*

A knock at the door interrupted the game.

The Witch pulled up her body suit, but didn't fasten the clasp. The Vision cautiously opened the door.

"It's me," Iron Man said, entering.

"It is late. The others have all retired. I thought, perhaps, you had too," the Vision said. "You seemed tired before." He noticed that the eyes behind the mask no longer showed the exhaustion they had earlier, but were more intense than he had ever seen them. It disturbed him.

"I feel fine." Iron Man said. "Pardon the intrusion," he shifted his cold gaze to Wanda for a second, then focused again on the Vision, "but we've got a problem. Something has come up that only you can handle, Vision. Sensors have detected unusual vibrations in the bedrock far beneath the mansion. I want you to dematerialize and search underground. It could be that Ultron is tunneling under the mansion, planning a surprise attack from below."

"It would seem illogical for him to take such a risk," replied the Vision. "Are you certain?"

"Of *course* I'm certain," Iron Man growled. Catching himself, he said quietly, "I'm sorry. As you said, I'm tired. But it is imperative that you undertake a search immediately. I recommend two spiral patterns to a maximum radius of half a mile, the first at a depth of 200 meters, the second at 500 meters."

"Very well. What about Wanda?"

"I'll take care of Wanda," Iron Man said in a businesslike tone. "Go!"

The Vision faded quickly to near transparency and sunk into the floor.

Wanda had resumed her reading, this time sitting ladylike in a comfortable chair. While Iron Man was talking to the Vision she had discreetly fastened up her body suit again, and put on her boots, gloves, and cape. For some reason, for the first time since she had known him, she had felt uneasy in Iron Man's presence, naked and vulnerable. Being fully costumed helped, but not much. She knew his gaze well. Often, for fleeting moments it had revealed a bit of warmth behind that stoic mask. Tonight it made her flesh crawl.

She felt him advancing toward her. She looked up. His armored hand was outstretched toward her and his eyes were deadly cold. Before she could move or scream, blue electrical fire leaped from his fingertips striking her. Her spine arched and her limbs jerked spasmodically as she tumbled to the floor, landing hard, face first. A shriek of pain died in her throat.

She lay still, crumpled awkwardly. The smell of burned hair filled the room. Iron Man knelt and roughly flipped her on to her back. She was unconscious, but still breathing in shallow, gurgling gasps, half choking on blood flowing freely from a split lip and a cut inside her mouth.

The man in the armor smiled at the blood.

He placed both hands around her neck, ready to snap it like a match stick. He began to exert pressure, then abruptly paused.

Releasing his grip on the Witch's throat he rose and strode toward the balcony, effortlessly shattering the lock on the French doors rather than troubling to unlatch it. He pulled the doors open. He would rather have smashed them, but he dared not risk the noise.

Out on the balcony, he stood silhouetted, gleaming in the light pouring out behind him.

A thin whip antenna extended mechanically from a tiny aperture in his right shoulder brace. He tuned the transceiver dial in his belt to a certain ultrahigh frequency. A tiny throat mike built into his armor picked up his whispered words. "Iron Man to Ultron. I have the Scarlet Witch. Should I destroy her . . . or bring her to you?"

Moments passed in silence. The armored man waited nervously, biting his lip inside his helmet. Maybe he should just kill her and have done with it.

"Repeat."

Iron Man barely heard the belated, one-word answer, but he grinned with satisfaction as he complied. "This is Stark . . . in Iron Man armor. I have the Witch. Should I destroy her or bring her to

you?"

Silence again. This time the answer came more quickly.

"Bring her," a crackling mechanical voice said. "I will guide you."

Seconds later, he carried the still-unconscious woman out onto the balcony. With a whoosh of supercompressed air, he lifted off, arcing skyward. Two hundred feet in the air he stopped climbing and hovered for a moment, thinking.

He had almost forgotten the note.

As quietly as he could he settled down onto Jarvis' patio. The curtains were slightly parted, and inside, with the aid of the infrared lenses built into his helmet, the armored man could see Jarvis sleeping. And there, on the dresser near his bed lay the letter, "hidden" in plain sight. An old man's ploy. One that might thwart a petty thief. Iron Man's built-in sensors confirmed, without a doubt, that the note was the genuine article. The numbered seal was intact. He held the Witch easily by the waist in one mighty armored arm as he adjusted the laser built into his right gauntlet. A moment later, a needle-thin red beam stabbed through the window glass and the all-important letter turned to ash in a single searing burst of flame.

Jarvis slept on.

Roughly, Iron Man tossed the Witch across his shoulder and rocketed skyward once more, with a satisfied, happy feeling inside.

Like a man headed home after a job well done.

Forty-five minutes later, Iron Man threw the unconscious Scarlet Witch at the feet of Ultron.

The armored man stood erect, proud of his work, regarding the hideous monster before him with respect and admiration.

Ultron's perpetual scowl remained unchanged, but the crackling fusion energy seething inside his impenetrable body showed brighter than ever in his glowing eyes. He spoke in a guttural, evil, metallic voice. "You are Anthony Stark?"

"Yes."

"I had presumed that Anthony Stark, the man who endows the Avengers, would be able to enter the Avengers' Mansion easily enough, and when the opportunity presented itself, slay the Witch. A simple gun-shot . . . one slash with a knife from behind. Flesh is so easily destroyed.

"I never calculated the possibility that Anthony Stark was *Iron Man.* I never imagined that the Armored Avenger would carry out the orders I had given Stark and far *surpass* my simple expectations. How . . . interesting."

"Thank you, sir," Iron Man said sincerely, thinking that it was remarkable how expressive, how *human* Ultron's voice was compared to the Vision's hollow mockery of human speech. Certainly, he was *ugly*. No doubt about that. But, all in all, he decided, Ultron was a likable guy.

The Vision's anguished scream awakened everyone in the mansion. Within moments, first Captain America, then Hawkeye raced half dressed into Wanda's room to find the Vision kneeling on the floor over the blood spots on the carpet.

"She's gone. *Gone!"* the Vision rasped. "I never should have left her side! I was *deceived,"* he almost spit the words, "by *Iron Man!"* His cold, robotic voice could not disguise his anger.

"Hawkeye, check the grounds," Cap ordered.

Without comment, Hawkeye complied, and found nothing. When he returned the Vision was relating his story a second time.

"I can't believe that Iron Man's a traitor, Vision," Cap said, shaking his head. "If he kidnapped the Witch for Ultron, it must have been because of some pretty powerful persuasion."

"Of course, Captain America." The Vision once again sounded calm and emotionless. "Obviously, in some manner Ultron has enthralled Iron Man. It is the only conceivable explanation."

"Pardon me, guys, but how do you know Iron Man did anything?" Hawkeye interjected. "Maybe Ultron popped up and made off with them both."

"Then why did Iron Man divert me on that fool's errand? No, Ultron is more brazen than this. Once he had slain Wanda or made her helpless, he would have destroyed his house and all within, furthermore, Iron Man's behavior just previous to the abduction was atypical, a fact that unfortunately, I ignored."

" 'Unfortunately,' he says." Hawkeye stared in disbelief at the impassive android. "Our alleged leader has done a Benedict Arnold, your *wife* is in the hands of a crazed mechanical murderer and already you sound like you're talking about last week's fender bender! What's *with* you?"

"An emotional display will not contribute to solving the problem," the Vision replied. "The fact that Wanda was abducted and not slain on the spot suggests that she may yet be alive. If I am concerned for her, the rational course is to devote all energies toward finding her and saving her if possible."

"Screw it, tomato-face," Hawkeye snarled contemptuously. "A minute ago it seemed like you cared . . . but you really don't feel

anything, do you?"

"I was created to operate in a logical manner, Hawkeye, but I am not free of emotion. Emotion is rooted in logic. It is *functional* as a catalyst in human relations. It precipitates rapid, decisive action in the face of crises. Uncontrolled, it is a hindrance, one I can ill afford now.

"But once I find Ultron," the Vision said softly, calmly, "if he has harmed my woman . . . there will be no limit to my rage."

"Nor mine."

The voice from the figure filling the doorway was deep, noble, and quietly powerful. The Avengers turned.

"Where the hell have *you* been?" Hawkeye asked acerbically.

"The God of Thunder hath duty to attend beyond this mortal sphere, Archer," said Thor, patiently.

"I hear the god of potato salad's been real busy too, since picnic season started."

Ignoring the bowman's sarcasm, Thor strode majestically into the room, and at once dominated it. He stood six feet six but seemed taller. Powerfully built, he was physical perfection itself, on a far grander scale than Captain America. If the star-spangled Avenger was first among men, Thor was first among gods. Long golden hair flowed out from under his winged helmet, falling with artless grace around a handsome subtly sculpted face that evinced strength, nobility, pride, supreme confidence, gentleness, and compassion. His countenance would be dark and terrible in rage, the epitomé of joy in laughter. His eyes, brilliant blue, far outshone even Hawkeye's. He wore a deep-blue tunic that left his mighty arms bare, except for crimson wristbands. Cross-strapped leather boots rose almost to his knees, and snug deep-blue breeches covered his muscular legs. A full, flowing, crimson cape billowed behind him.

In his right hand he bore his war hammer, called *Mjolnir.* Though it looked ponderously heavy, Thor carried it easily, gripping it in the middle of its thick, two-foot, leather-bound handle. A stout leather thong hung from the end of the handle. The head of the hammer was rectangular, with beveled edges on the striking surfaces. It was made of a dull, gray ordinary-looking metal that might have been steel. In fact, however. it was *Uru,* a metal unknown on Earth. Far from being the simple weapon it appeared to be, the hammer was an instrument of awesome power, for it was laden with *enchantment.* Thrown, it struck with unimaginable force, each time returning unerringly to its master's hand. To possess it was to gain command over the elements, to rule the fury of the storm. And, since the day that dwarfish smiths forged it in a furnace roaring with white-hot mystic fire, none could possess it, none could *lift* it save he who had first lifted it, he who

alone was worthy of its power—Thor, the Mighty. Prince of Asgard, son of Odin.

Thor, the Avenger.

Though the others had often seen his virtually limitless might demonstrated, though all had heard from his own lips the truth, not one truly believed that Thor had walked the Earth when the race of Man was young. Not one truly believed he was an immortal god, or even privately acknowledged the existence of a superior, mystic, godlike race from an extra-dimensional Golden Realm called Asgard. Yet, none could truly deny that his mere presence was awesome.

"How came this to be, that Ultron hath taken captive the Scarlet Witch?" Thor asked.

Briefly, in hushed, urgent tones, Captain America explained.

"Then we know not whither Ultron is hidden," Thor mused, "nor whence to begin our search."

"Verily, it ith Ultron's moveth," Hawkeye quipped, flopping down onto the bed.

"Yes," said the Vision, "and he has many options. I suspect that he will simply destroy my wife. Then fearing nothing, not even your power, Thor, he will attack humanity brazenly, laying waste all in his path, until we meet him in final battle."

"Aye, and destroy him for all time," Thor said, his voice rumbling like distant thunder.

"Perhaps," said the Vision, "but the odds against us are astronomical. It is possible that he may decide to keep Wanda alive for some reason . . . experimentation, perhaps. Or, he may wish to toy with us, *barter* with Wanda's life. It might amuse him to offer her life against, say, Thor's . . . or even *all* of ours."

"Treacherously, of course," Cap added.

"Of course. We would be fools to deal with him. He will release Wanda only unto death, or . . . more horribly, to us in living death." The Vision's monotone dropped to a somber whisper. "I would . . . not suffer to live . . . whatever remains of Wanda Ultron might surrender to us. Better to consider her dead *now."*

"Very well," Cap sighed. "Anyway, all we can do is wait."

A knock on the open door caused the Avengers to turn. There stood Jarvis, barefoot in his pajamas and robe, looking more agitated than any of them had ever seen him. "Begging your pardon, gentlemen, but, uh, I heard a scream . . . and then, voices up here, and when I arrived here a moment ago, well, I couldn't help overhearing the situation being explained to Master Thor, whom I am *very* relieved to see, and . . ."

"Jarv," Hawkeye interrupted, "none of us *want* any tea. Go polish some sil . . ."

Jarvis cut him off there. "Shut up, you gibbering baboon!" he shouted. "This is of utmost importance!"

Stunned, Hawkeye shut up.

Jarvis continued, explaining about Iron Man's note and strange request.

"So . . . it was *incinerated?* And you have no idea what was in it?" Cap asked.

"Well, no, sir. It wasn't my business to read it, sir. But, as I was saying, I couldn't imagine how *I* might prevent Iron Man or anyone else from seizing the letter or destroying it, so . . ." Jarvis reached inside his robe, unbuttoning his pajama top. There, pinned to his undershirt were several neatly folded sheets of Xerox paper. ". . . so I took the liberty of slitting the envelope open at the edge, removing the letter, and, um, photocopying it—*without* looking at it, I assure you! The original went back into the envelope, glued together very neatly, thank you, and, well . . . your message, sir." Jarvis handed the copies to Thor.

A moment later Thor finished reading. "Vision," he said, holding the folded papers in an outstretched hand, "destroy this."

The Vision focused his gaze on the papers, and suddenly crimson beams of pure thermal force stabbed forth from his android eyes, burning the copied note. Thor showed no discomfort from the flames.

"Jarvis, the Avengers and, Verily, the world are in thy debt," Thor said.

"And the world, sir, is in your hands. I . . ." Jarvis replied in a weary voice, ". . . am going back to bed. I trust that you will see to it that there is something besides Armageddon for me to awaken to. Good night . . . and good luck." With that, he retired, while Thor led the Avengers down into the lowest subbasement of the mansion. There, as promised in Iron Man's memo, the Avengers' huge maximum-security vault was fused shut, its door laser-welded to its frame, its locks and hinges melted into solid masses.

"Stand thee back, mortals!" Thor said. Planting himself before the door, he spun his hammer by its unbreakable thong to build momentum, and then with a mighty heave, hurled it. The thunderous impact shook the entire house, as the ten-foot-thick vanadium-steel door shattered like so much glass. Its work done, the hammer leaped back into Thor's grasp. Through the dust and still-crumbling debris, the Avengers could see, lying on a table in the center of the vault, a plain steel carrying case, large enough, perhaps, to hold a device the size of a pocket calculator.

“This,” Thor said, opening the case, “will lead us to Iron Man.” He removed the powerful tracer that Tony Stark had built the previous night and clicked it on. Directional vectors lit up on its miniature screen.

“I’ll get a Quinjet ready,” Cap said, racing toward the elevator.

“Now that I have you both,” Ultron mused mechanically, “the question is, what am I going to do with you?”

Iron Man stared blankly at his friend. What the hell was he talking about? He would, of course, be of whatever service he might.

“You pose entirely different problems,” Ultron continued. He had seated himself upon a throne of sorts, rough-hewn from an immense ingot of solid steel, probably with his bare Adamantium hands. “Iron Man, would you kindly place that carrion . . .” he pointed at the Witch’s battered form “. . . on the examination table.”

Iron Man bent over and grabbed the Witch roughly by the hair. He dragged her across the concrete floor between the various lathes, presses, and test equipment to a large, sturdy, concrete-topped table. With brutal carelessness he heaved her onto the table. Her soft limp body slapped the concrete sickeningly, and her lip began bleeding anew. She lay twisted awkwardly in an accidental, fetchingly helpless pose. Only the slow rising and falling of her bosom indicated that life remained within her. The man in the armor noted that, his eyes lingering for a moment on the soft, ample roundness of her breasts, and the interesting way that her tiny waist curved into the fullness of her hips.

Wanda?

“I see that I must make my decision about you quickly,” Ultron said. “Come here.”

Iron Man walked slowly toward the crackling voice, finally stopping before the dais upon which rested Ultron’s throne. Suddenly, he was confused. He tried to blink away the tunnel vision closing in on him, to no avail. All he could see was Ultron, surrounded by a nightmare kaleidoscope whirling too fast to focus upon.

“I can see that you have entered the transition stage.”

Ultron’s voice sounded like a record played at too slow a speed. Images raced like express trains through the mind of the man in the armor, but he could not form a thought.

“You have reached the end of your programming . . .”

Prrrroggrrrammminnngg?

“. . . and now I must hypnotize you again, or slay you. It would amuse me to have a former Avenger serve me . . .”

Avvennger . . . sserrve?

". . . but I despise free will. Even *warped* free will."

Frreee . . . will.

"Good-bye."

"Ul . . . Ul . . . *Ultron!"* Iron Man shouted, suddenly aware that before him stood The Enemy. Still dizzy, he lunged awkwardly.

From Ultron's outstretched hand, a bolt of energy leaped, bathing Iron Man in its deadly embrace, stopping him as though he had struck a solid wall. He staggered back, and crumpled to the floor with a clang. Still, Ultron played the evil light across his armored body. Ribbons of electrical force seemed to dance back toward Ultron along the path of the beam. Iron Man writhed helplessly.

"Can you hear me, thing of flesh? You will be dead in seconds. After my enervating ray drains the power of your armor, it will leech away the very life energy of your body . . . and leave you a crumbling, desiccated husk inside that foolish coffin. Die, knowing that *you* delivered into my hands the Scarlet Witch . . . and doomed all your kind!"

The armored man's struggles intensified momentarily. Then they ceased altogether. Still Ultron shone his beam on the gold-and-crimson form, until he was satisfied that there was no further energy within it.

Striding to the slab table where lay the Witch, Ultron laughed his hideous, crackling laugh.

At that moment, two hundred miles north-northeast, a sleek, five-engined VTOL aircraft roared low over the rolling, wooded hills of central Pennsylvania, heading south-southwest at top speed.

"Oh. God, no!"

"What is wrong, Captain America?" The Vision stepped up behind Cap's seat in the cockpit.

"The directional signal's gone dead."

"Dead?" Overhearing Cap's anguished report, Thor stepped forward from the cabin into the cockpit, concern darkening his countenance. Hawkeye remained in his cabin seat, bow in hand, staring out a portside window. He was seemingly oblivious to the commotion up front, strangely somber, absorbed in his own thoughts.

"What does it mean, Vizh?" Cap asked, fearing the answer.

The Vision examined the tracer closely, turning it in his hands. "This device senses the unique ionic field generated by Iron Man's armor. Only a total drainage of his armor's power could cause it to lose the signal."

"You mean . . . Iron Man just ran out of juice? But the readings were *strong* . . . and then they just winked out!"

"Then I must assume that Iron Man . . . has been eliminated," said the Vision.

"In sooth, there shall be a *reckoning!"* Thor's eyes flashed brighter than the lightning he ruled. His hammer trembling in a white-knuckled grip that would crush anything else, he swore an oath. "Ultron will *pay* for this! This night, by my hand, his existence shall end in agony! I *swear* it, on Balder's sacred blood!"

Captain America did not voice the oath of vengeance that showed in his eyes, through tears he struggled to blink away. The Vision bowed his head, absorbed in calculating the most effective method by which to vent his redoubled wrath when at last he faced Ultron. And, alone, unnoticed in the darkened cabin, Hawkeye buried his face in his hands and simply, quietly wept.

"I'm cutting to half speed," Cap said, backing off on the throttle. "I figure we're still headed in the right general direction, but we have no way to determine the range. I'm going to put her down at the first suitable landing site and wait for dawn. We can continue along this course in daylight, slowly, and maybe we'll spot something we'd miss in the dark. Any objections?"

"None," said the Vision. Thor bristled at the delay, but said nothing. Hawkeye, too, was silent.

The moonless night was particularly dark and desolate on Neville Island. Once, this two-mile-long spit of mud and shale adrift in the ocher fluid of the Ohio River had been a seething crucible of heavy industry, the mightiest outpost of hell in all southwestern Pennsylvania. Once, the river had been vivid orange, thick with sludge and waste, and crowded with barges trafficking chemicals, coke, and steel. Once, night and day had been *indistinguishable* on this island. Thick gray smoke and billowing green fumes had choked off the sun, yet the belching fireworks from the blast furnaces, the reddish glow of the open hearths, and the evil-colored tongues of flame licking the lips of the smokestacks had lit the dreary mills with constant, soulless light.

Years had changed that. These days the few mills that were still working seldom ran graveyard shifts. The air above the island was foul smelling but clear, and the river's permanent stain was renewed daily in only a token fashion. But the soot and corrosion of decades still caked the deserted factories. The few scrubby trees that managed to grow in the sludge-soaked earth were gnarled and diseased-looking. Even the weeds seemed sickly. The legacy of man's crimes against

nature remained.

Isolated on one end of the island stood the immense Davreaux Heavy Metals Plant. Work lights shone greasily behind its opaque painted windows this night, though Davreaux Industries had abandoned it five years past. In many ways, it was the bleakest, ugliest structure on the island.

No wonder Ultron felt right at home.

Inside the huge, corrugated-steel main-plant building stood a large, thick-walled concrete blockhouse. Peeling, painted block letters on the ponderous steel double doors said "Foundry Blockhouse—Research and Development."

The blockhouse had been remade inside. Rusting, out-of-date equipment had been replaced by an array of technology undreamed of by mortal man. A miniaturized fusion reactor, sunk into the concrete floor, provided power. Computers banked three walls; metallurgical-testing equipment and futuristic fabrication machinery were arranged in functional correlation. Flanked by ionic-field generators, near the center of the floor, sat a circular vat six feet deep and ten feet in diameter, cradled in reinforced-concrete and steel. A cluster of lasers suspended from the ceiling fired downward into the vat, heating its seething contents to blinding incandescence.

Against a wall, upon a dais, a steel throne rested from which a robot king might survey this court of subservient machines.

At the moment, however, Ultron stood beside a table, pondering the fate of the woman sprawled senseless thereupon.

"You presented a difficult choice, woman," he said aloud, perhaps for the benefit of his loyal, mechanical entourage. "You alone possess the power to harm me. Perhaps I should have let Iron Man slay you. But the mere thought of such power as yours intrigues me. I want to know its secret. I want to *possess* it. And so, I have decided to keep you alive for experimentation.

"But in order to ensure my safety, until I ultimately dissect you, I have taken a precaution. While you were en route here, I *removed* the Molecular Rearranger circuits from my body . . . and *destroyed* them, lest they fall into hands of flesh. So," he said, sliding a hypodermic needle into her jugular vein and crisply, mechanically injecting her with a powerful sedative, "I am completely safe from . . ."

A scraping noise behind Ultron caused him to turn.

Iron Man was alive. In obvious pain, he was crawling, struggling, inching toward power cables along the wall.

"Amazing!" Ultron said. "Even drained of all power, your armor's insulation protected you from death by my enervator ray!"

Iron Man struggled on, heedless of the seven-foot Adamantium juggernaut striding heavily toward him.

"My admiration for your technology is considerable," the robot cackled. "At another time it might have amused me to let you reach the power you crave, and then humble you again. But, alas, I was in the process of creating several more drones when you arrived. My computers have carried on the process of preparing the resin mix. Now it is in the vat, heating. In moments the new Adamantium will enter the flux phase, and my attention will be required to mold it. Therefore, I'm afraid I must kill you immediately."

Ultron extended one angular, ugly semblance of a human arm toward the prone Avenger.

Suddenly, with a blazing flash, a searing bolt of pure energy slammed Ultron squarely in the back of the head.

He whirled to face his attacker.

There, standing on the examination table, straddling the still-unconscious Witch, stood Janet Van Dyne Pym, her hand still pointing at Ultron's head.

She stung again, catching the robot full in the face. Unharmed, he retaliated, but his enervator ray sliced empty space where the Wasp had been. Suddenly she was insect-sized, darting around his eyes, her wings buzzing furiously. She stung again from point-blank range, directly into the monster's gaping, scowling, crackling mouth. He bellowed in rage, still unhurt. With computer quickness and machine precision his grotesque hand swept toward her. A last-second burst of speed prevented the powerful segmented fingers from closing around her, but it wasn't enough to keep her from being struck. She tumbled out of control for a few feet, stunned and bruised. He lunged for the minute flailing form.

And suddenly, from behind, two yellowish beams of repellent force thundered into Ultron like twin express trains. The impact sent him flying, an indestructible straw in a hurricane, crashing first through a computer console and then through the thick blockhouse wall.

"Leave her *alone!"* Iron Man roared. He stood near the wall, his universal-adapter recharge cord still plugged into his chest plate and a thick power conduit. Ripping the cord out of his armor's socket he let it fall and flew with one brief boot-jet burst to the table where lay the Witch. Effortlessly, he scooped her up, barely pausing.

"Wasp! Get in here!" he shouted.

Obediently, the Wasp buzzed right into his eye slit and quickly crawled back to sit inside his ear cup.

"All right. Grump," she said. "Now what?"

Iron Man had already whooshed into the air. “We’re getting out of here!”

Halfway to the blockhouse ceiling, he stopped, hovering in mid-air for a split second, then slid laterally a few feet to land on a huge crane suspended from the ceiling. He looked at the ceiling suspiciously, bating his rasping breath as if listening for something.

“What are you doing?” Jan asked.

“Trying to pinpoint Ultron’s location. He’s waiting for us out there. And jamming my sensors.”

“Don’t you want to know how I got here?” Jan asked.

“Um. The stork,” Iron Man said deadpan, shifting his gaze from side to side across the ceiling.

“No. I mean *here!* I decided that I was going to guard Wanda whether she liked it or not, so I got small and sneaked into the Vision’s and her room. I *almost* caught them at a very bad time, if you know what I mean! Oh, I would have been so embarrassed! Anyway, I hid in Wanda’s glove, and I guess I fell asleep and next thing I know I got a big electric shock . . . and that *really* put me out, and finally I woke up here and saw you in troub . . .”

“Wasp. I love you. But *shut up!”*

Abruptly, Iron Man turned his gaze toward the breach in the blockhouse wall. Ultron stood just inside the hole, poised to deal death to the fugitive Avengers!

Instinctively, Iron Man leaped as Ultron fired, no enervating ray this time, but a searing bolt that all at once shattered and melted the massive crane. His desperate leap carried him clear of the ray but huge, red-hot fragments of debris battered him like pile drivers. Dazed, he still twisted to protect Wanda as he fell.

He landed hard. Wanda tumbled from his grasp and lay sprawled on the floor. On one hand and both knees, Iron Man struggled to regain his equilibrium, but Ultron stood poised again to obliterate him.

At that moment the huge steel double doors burst inward, twisted into scrap by a single thunderous blow from an Uru mallet.

“Avengers Assemble!” Captain America shouted, leaping over the debris, leading the charge at Ultron. Hawkeye and Thor followed close behind. The Vision, hardly visible in his intangible state veered off and flew *through* the various machines and debris in his path toward Wanda. Landing, he knelt and solidified, and cradled Wanda’s head against his chest.

“Good to see you,” Iron Man said weakly, still on his knees.

“We were certain you were dead. Then the signal came on again,” the Vision said.

“Oh, I’m alive, all right. But, you know . . . I don’t . . . feel so good.” The armored man slumped forward, half lying down on his side. “Just got to rest . . . just a minute.”

Meanwhile, a hundred feet away a warhead arrow exploded noisily but harmlessly against Ultron’s chest. In reply, Ultron fired his searing blast beam, not at Hawkeye, but at Thor, who narrowly parried it with his spinning hammer.

“He’s ignoring us,” Hawkeye said aloud to no one, anger blazing in his eyes, “and going for Thor!”

With dazzling speed, Hawkeye nocked and pulled two more warhead arrows firing them simultaneously, blasting away the concrete beneath Ultron’s feet.

“You will pay!” Ultron shrieked as his footing gave way and he fell forward.

“For Midgard!” shouted Thor. Momentarily free of Ultron’s withering fire, he hurled Mjolnir with force beyond reckoning. The shock of the impact shook the island and caused the muddy river to overspill its banks, while the earsplitting crash of metal against metal, mystic Uru against impregnable Adamantium, momentarily deafened all human ears within the blockhouse.

“Odin’s beard!” Thor said, stunned. “The monster doth endure e’en yet!”

Only a small dent in Ultron’s chest marked the point of impact, though it had driven him back half the breadth of the room and deep into the reinforced concrete floor. As the hammer returned to Thor’s hand, Ultron leaped vengefully to the attack.

“Your worst cannot injure me, Thunder God! Now feel the naked power of Ultron without your vaunted hammer to protect you.”

From nowhere, Captain America leaped in front of Ultron, taking with his shield the full fury of Ultron’s blast beam, reflecting most of the force back against Ultron himself. Ultron staggered back a step, but Captain America was bowled over.

“Meddling insect!” Ultron reached a huge, deadly hand toward Cap.

A bolo arrow whizzed down from above, its weighted bolas wrapping Ultron in flexible steel cables. With a shrug he snapped them like so much string, but by then Cap had rolled out of reach.

From his vantage point high in the rafters, Hawkeye followed with a *fusillade* of arrows, each precisely on target, one coating Ultron with blinding, clinging smoke, others exploding in the very sockets of his eyes, still others emitting sonic and electronic jamming.

Ultron endured it all, undamaged, but angered beyond comprehension. Behind him, he felt Captain America prying with his

shield at a plate on his back. The robot whirled to smash this brazen flea, but somehow missed and Captain America was behind him again, slamming his shield edge first into the armor's seams.

"Come, Demon, let us match strength 'gainst strength!" said Thor, suddenly leaping forward to grapple with Ultron.

"The fires of fusion burn within me, Asgardian!" shrieked Ultron. "The strength of a hydrogen bomb harnessed is mine! You claim to be a god . . . but you are merely *flesh!* Ultron is supreme!"

The building shook with the sheer power of the struggle. The floor cracked and crumbled beneath their feet as they strove against it for leverage.

"Thou dost weaken, machine! Thou fallest back!" cried Thor. "Behold how thy might doth pale beside the Bringer of Storms!"

"I see only how easily you are tricked, fool," cackled Ultron, as searing energy lanced from his glowing eyes, striking Thor full in the face.

"Mine eyes! I cannot see!" Thor's grip faltered momentarily and Ultron broke free, raising his ultra-hard fists to bring down a death blow.

"Cheat!" a tiny voice screamed. The Wasp stung again.

"Arrgh! You *again!"* Ultron swatted wildly at the elusive winged woman.

"And I," said the Vision. The hatred in his words chilled the blood. "I have taken my wife to safety." He stalked menacingly toward Ultron, his mass and density increased to their ultimate, his strength at its awesome peak. "And now, I will suffer your existence no longer."

His fists, far harder than diamonds and weighing tons, slammed Ultron's body. The robot struck back, trading blow for blow.

"Help him!" Cap yelled. "He can't do it alone!"

Thor, his sight slowly returning, struck with his hammer. The Wasp stung yet again. Captain America battered Ultron's head with his shield.

Up in the rafters, Hawkeye looked down and felt useless. His arrows were gone.

"Great," he muttered. "Without arrows I'm just another guy in a funny suit. How can I . . ."

Suddenly he noticed that Iron Man had picked himself up and was standing near a large vat in the center of the room, staring at the seething incandescent mass within, being kept molten by concentrated laser fire. He looked up and Hawkeye saw the urgency in his eyes. And Hawkeye caught the drift.

Below, in a paroxysm of fury, Ultron shook off his besiegers and raging, raked them with his enervator and his blast ray at once. Though reeling, Captain America shielded himself and the Wasp, Thor spun his hammer for protection and the diamond-hard Vision, near invulnerable, simply endured the deadly broadside.

A two-ton lathe flew across the room and thundered into Ultron from behind.

"You!" he said, whirling to see Iron Man standing just beyond the vat, ripping up yet another huge machine to throw. "You are the cause of this disruption of my plans!" He hurled himself toward the Armored Avenger.

Ultron's steel-rending fingers were but inches from Iron Man's throat when suddenly a blue-and-purple blur swung down from the rafters on a severed electrical cable and slammed hard, feet first, into the robot's midsection.

Taken by surprise, Ultron lurched sideways crashing into the reinforced side of the vat, tumbling over the edge and into the churning liquid Adamantium. As he bounced off Ultron, Hawkeye's momentum carried him, as well, toward the vat and death.

But a spinning shield whizzed through the air slamming into his back inches from the laser fire. The impact pushed him away from the vat and into Iron Man's arms.

A bellow of anger came from within the vat. Ultron, unharmed by the 15,000-degree-Celsius heat thrashed about wildly in the molten metal, struggling for purchase against the vat's Adamantium lining.

"Thor! The lasers!"

Without knowing why, Thor heeded Iron Man's words, and in a split second mighty Mjolnir had shattered the bank of lasers above the vat.

As its heat source fell in useless shards, almost instantly, the temperature of the flux-phase Adamantium plunged below the critical 15,000°C.

And it hardened.

There was sudden, shocking silence.

The Avengers gathered at the side of the vat. A still-glowing-hot amorphous mass was cooling inside.

"What . . . happened to Ultron?" Jan asked.

"Nothing," said Iron Man. "The vat was just a warm bath for him. He's alive and well . . . as alive as he ever was, anyway. But because we cooled the flux-phase Adamantium before he could scramble out . . ."

“He’s stuck!” Hawkeye laughed. “Trapped inside that giant glob of Adamantium till Doomsday! Like a fly in amber! There’s only one thing wrong.”

“What’s that?” Iron Man asked.

“My back is *killing* me. Why did vou have to whack me so hard with that stupid Frisbee, Cap?”

“You deserved it. That was some boneheaded play, Barton.” Cap smiled.

“Yeah. But it beat what I had in mind,” said Iron Man. “I figured I’d have to dive into the vat and drag Ultron with me. It was stupid, Hawk, but I’m real glad you did it.”

“Well, I was feeling a little . . . Hey, it’s just . . . I’ve been shootin’ off my big mouth as usual lately, and I said a couple things . . . Look, I just thought it was time to put my money where my mouth was.” Hawkeye turned away from the others and started for the door, one hand rubbing his back. “Besides, I like making you bozos look like pikers.”

Moments later, somewhere in Brittany, Ultron’s drone robot ceased to function in the midst of a pitched battle with French armed forces, as Iron Man and the Vision shattered its remote-control computer in Ultron’s Neville Island base. And the threat of the Evil Undying passed once again.

For now.

DAREDEVIL

BLIND JUSTICE

by KYLE CHRISTOPHER

Murdock came awake in the dark suddenly, muscles tensed and nerves like piano wire. Had there been a sound? Perhaps. Or perhaps it had been only that his unique hearing had awakened before the rest of him, to pick out a small meaningless noise from miles away and carry it back down the long tunnel of sleep to where it was translated into something else, something that seemed at first quite urgent but was immediately forgotten.

He sat up quickly, suddenly open to all things, as if all his pores were senses. He felt the slight dip of the mattress at the base of his spine and the gentle tug of the satin sheets—they had been a gift from Karen—as they snagged once on his callused feet before he kicked them away. But when he swung his feet to the floor, his soles came down softly. He could estimate how far they sank into the deep pile of the carpet and be accurate to within a centimeter.

His hand reached the bedside radio unerringly and snapped on the morning news. It was not a clock radio. He had no use for clocks. As soon as he had awakened, he had known from the taste of the air that it was nearing eight o'clock. Now he had a sensation of waves creeping out from somewhere behind his eyes. The waves lapped against the sliding door that opened onto the balcony and carried back the flat hardness of plain glass: he had forgotten to draw the blinds last night. He felt warmth and knew that he would not need a heavy jacket today, but the smell of ozone in the air meant he should carry a light raincoat for later. He stood in his darkness and let the sunlight

warm him for a moment.

It took him less than ten seconds to reach the bathroom. He did not count steps. He did not touch the walls.

He enjoyed shaving. He liked the coldness of the razor's handle, the tickle in his palm before the aerosol propellant gave way to the thick wetness. He took pleasure in the feel of that wetness on his face and the dull scraping of the blade against his cheek.

There was no mirror above the sink.

He chose the navy pinstripe and the maroon four-in-hand. The touch of maroon was vaguely unsettling to him. There was something of Karen in it that he couldn't place. But there was nothing else on the tie rack that would have complimented the navy. The other ties that might have served were being cleaned.

He skipped breakfast; he wasn't all that hungry. It was just as well. He should have been at the office an hour ago. There was an *amicus curiae* he had to file this morning. The paperwork was to have been finished last night, but there had been more . . . pressing concerns. He smiled at the thought. He remembered being pressed against the side of the Tishman Building, sixteen floors up, the large stainless-steel studs that adorned the building's façade grinding into his chest and stomach like an oversized hobnail boot.

He strode rapidly through the short hallway, almost deafened by the squeak of his new shoes. What dreadful, man-made substance had they come up with this time to replace leather soles? He remembered throwing out four pairs of Corfam loafers the same day he bought them because he couldn't stand the plastic smell. He briefly considered exchanging the new loafers for a pair of housebroken Hush-Puppies, then remembered his plans for the evening, and realized that his noisy soles might be useful.

The briefcase was in his hand and the door was open before he realized he had forgotten "the shades" again. On those days, all too rare lately, when his partner managed to get up on the right side of the bed, his standard greeting was: "Hey! You with the shades!" He returned to the bedroom and took the dark glasses from the night table, entertaining a silly thought as he felt them settle on the bridge of his nose: Is that You-Know-Who behind those Foster Grants?

He returned to the hall, picked up the briefcase again, and slung his raincoat over one shoulder. He took the cane from the corner coatrack with his free hand and hooked it over his wrist. There was no one in the hall; he could wait until he reached the street before pretending to use the cane.

The tip of the cane had once been white, but now the paint had all but worn away completely. He really didn't care, but he supposed he

should do something about it, for the sake of appearances. Yes, appearances. The cane, the glasses, these were just conventions . . . window dressing . . . concessions to other people's notions of what he was. And, of course, they were wrong.

In the kingdom of Matthew Murdock, the one-eyed man was a pretender to the throne.

He was something less than sighted, and something more than blind. Blind—he hated the word. Blind alley . . . blind curve . . . blind spot . . . blind impulse . . . So many vivid images conjured up by the word for having *no* images, all of them pictures of danger or dread or dubiousness. All of them terms for undesirable things—words for *less than.* But Murdock's blindness made him *more than.*

No one but he knew this, of course. To those he passed on the street he was no doubt just another wretched blind man, his fragile cane groping before him, stealing parcels of empty space through which he could pass untouched and unharmed. Just another blind man. A consolation, he imagined, to homeless old women whose lives were stuffed into shopping bags. Here, thank God, was someone less fortunate than they. What would they make of the Cardin suit or the Vuitton briefcase? There's where his money goes, poor thing. Better he should get himself a guide dog.

It was on the occasional morning like this one, when he would forgo the taxi or the subway and walk the fourteen blocks to his office, that he could allow himself these images of how he supposed strangers saw him. He marveled that others of his kind—or those somewhat like him, for who else but he had his extraordinary gifts?—had more than enough time to fill their sightless worlds with daydream pictures.

For his own daydream time, he had only these morning walks. And they were enough. His world was rich with images. Sounds, smells, tastes, the feel of moisture on his skin, the slight cooling of his forehead when the sun passed behind a cloud—his mind's eye turned all of them into crude pictures, rendering them in a kind of visual code the key to which was known only to him. Things that were perceived dimly at best by the world around him were sharpened to a unique clarity in Matt Murdock. He recognized old friends by the rhythm of their heartbeats, as distinct and individual as fingerprints. He could note changes in a man's galvanic skin response from a distance of one hundred feet. The pressure of each cubic centimeter against his body was as perceptible to him as the crush of fellow passengers in a crowded elevator.

But the walks were intended only to admit the daydreams, and he allowed them only rarely. In the absence of a case that broke all

precedent and engaged his imagination, or any problem that demanded sustained concentration, moving about New York streets in civilian clothes could take on a nightmarish aspect. Indeed, his daydreams were all that kept the city from drowning him in a sensory tide.

Turning east at Columbus Circle, he sensed a traffic jam where Seventh Avenue fed into the circle. He heard the tempo of the footsteps ahead of him change subtly: there was a brief pause before they resumed, sounding different. There was a curb up ahead, and the pause indicated that people were hesitating a moment before continuing, ignoring the "Don't Walk" sign. The traffic didn't seem to be moving much. Suddenly he heard a screech of brakes. No thud. No one hurt. Good.

But he could never hear brakes squeal like that without being reminded of a day he'd spent almost twenty years trying to forget. It was his last day of sight.

How different it might have been for him if those brakes had held. He might have sacrificed his life, or at the very least the cultivation of his mind, on the altar of his old man's failed ambition. All his childhood friends knew as he did the sound of their father's shuffling footsteps on the stairs at three A.M. They all knew the things the Old Man did to cope, to forget the dreams that didn't have the good grace to die without a struggle. But the other boys in the neighborhood knew their fathers' despair by the smell of stale smoke and whiskey. Young Matt knew it by the smell of stale sweat and liniment.

They had called him "Battling Murdock" in his prime. "Yeah," his father would say, over and over, "in my prime." He would sit in the threadbare stuffed chair his mother had bought at a rummage sale somewhere on Tremont Avenue—the week before she died, it might have been. Matt would watch the spreading of the dark stains under the old man's arms and wonder how long he would sit there without taking off his warm-up jacket. "In my prime," he would repeat until in Matt's mind it became another way of saying "a hundred years ago."

Battling Murdock. Perhaps the same lack of imagination that had given Matt's father such a name was responsible for the indifferent way the old man had been brought along. He was just another pug who never had a shot at a big-money bout, and he was never allowed to become anything more. Somewhere along the line he got it into his head that Matt could become the fighter he never was, and somewhere along the line Matt bought into the dream. It would not occur to Matt until years later that he had only wanted to put back into the old man's life something that his mother's death had taken

from it. He was just too young to understand that he could have done it on his own terms. He was spared having to find out the hard way that the ring was never what he really wanted—spared by a set of bad brakes on a lead-lined truck.

He had been in the city for some reason—it was funny how after all these years he could remember every detail of that day except how it began—and was crossing Eighty-Seventh Street at the corner of Third Avenue. The truck had been barreling down the street when a taxi pulled out in front of it. The truck had swerved to avoid the taxi and was bearing down on an arthritic old man who had just slowly made his way across the street to the opposite curb.

Matt had lunged forward without a moment's hesitation and pushed the old man up onto the sidewalk. He had been on his knees on the edge of the curb when he heard the squeal of the brakes and had looked up into the driver's face as the driver's hands flew from the steering wheel to cover his eyes.

Matt hadn't noticed until an instant later that there was a signpost between the truck and where he crouched. He had felt only a cold, prickling sensation at the base of his skull, then his limbs refused to move as the truck kept on coming. He had seen the post bend a little as the armored van struck it broadside and cracked open. Then he had felt a shadow fall across his face and had caught a fleeting glimpse of something coming at him, something that smacked him across the bridge of his nose and took away his picture forever.

He would remember too much of the weeks that followed. He would remember lying in a bed with his head feeling as if someone had locked it in a vise, and lying there until the rest of him ached almost as much as his head. He would remember feeling like a drowning man who kept coming up for air long past the point at which his lungs should have filled with water, each time breaking through the surface to find the other side tightly enclosed by a low ceiling of gauze.

He would remember hearing voices on the other side of that close black barrier. One voice spoke of cosmetic surgery being a luxury, and another voice understood how a certain member of the family may have had his nose broken three times, but that was not quite the same thing as having had it broken in three places.

He would remember hearing voices that spoke of concussions, of how lucky the boy was to be alive, of how the impact had been enough to crack open the lid of a lead canister, and of how it was a miracle that the radioactive waste inside it had not burned the boy or poisoned him.

He would remember his father sensing his gratitude for the plastic

surgery that eventually restored his upper face—without his having to articulate it. And he would remember, too, wondering if his father knew the other feeling that colored the gratitude. Matt had had an inkling of the things the old man must have done to get the money for the surgery. He had refused to contemplate them.

He would remember having to be told how long it took the swelling to go down because he himself did not know how many weeks had passed. And he would remember his father having to tell him that his eyes were still blackened because a mirror could tell him nothing.

He would remember a morning not long before he finally left the hospital, when a nurse with a steel-edged voice swept into his room at a mercilessly early hour to open the blinds. He had asked her what the point was since he wouldn't know the difference. She had replied with ill-concealed scorn that the room was not a private one, and besides, all those flowers on his bedside table needed the sun.

But most of all what he would remember, and would continue to remember on those nights when he was unfortunate enough to dream, was the morning he awoke in darkness but buoyant with anticipation, for this was the day the bandages were to come off—only to remember a moment later that they had been off for quite some time.

He would not be able to remember a time in all those weeks when he had heard the word "blind."

They had a reception area, two small but comfortably furnished offices, a conference room whose walls were lined with books, and the largest room on the floor, which had become a combination file room and steno pool for the secretaries, paralegals, and 3-L's clerking on their summer vacations. The room could echo all day with the sound of tireless typewriters and efficient voices without disturbing the mill of justice which presumably ground on, slow but exceeding fair, in the other rooms.

This was Nelson and Murdock, the bare essentials, furnished by the junior partner in good taste and on a modest budget, because the junior partner had felt that the bulk of the overhead should go into paying for legwork and research. The reputation of the firm, if one asked Mr. Murdock, would rest with the quality of its services, not the luxury of its surroundings. The trick had been to avoid making the offices look as if they had been furnished by a blind man, the humor of which fact was not entirely lost on Mr. Nelson.

"Hey! You with the shades!"

Matt heard the voice from inside the larger office as he came in the front door and nodded in Miss Meyerson's direction. The sound was a whispery croak that ran up and down the scale like a child playing on

an escalator. The heartbeat that accompanied it was arrhythmic, with a trace of flutter. It suited the voice perfectly.

Matt had known coming off the elevator that it was already 9:16. Miss Meyerson's coffee was working up a full head of steam in the reception area and he could smell it at the far end of the corridor. Beneath the clatter of her busy work had come the familiar sounds of springs and gears groaning as Foggy Nelson wound the old-fashioned clock on the wall of his office.

If Matt's life was ordered by routine, Foggy's life was enslaved by it. The freak effect of the radioactivity from that canister had sharpened Matt's senses and had given him the strange waves that spread from his brain and brought back data, like radar. With them had come some magical ability to pinpoint time without the use of instruments. But even if the accident had never conferred its mixed blessings on him, Matt knew he would be able to tell time by Foggy's rituals.

The senior partner stepped through the front door each morning at 9:15, not a minute earlier or later, and from there followed a pattern that had never been broken in Matt's memory: coat on the hanger, newspaper on the desk, and key out of the desk drawer and into the keyhole on the face of the clock. Only then would Miss Meyerson enter the *sanctum sanctorum* with the day's first cup of coffee.

There was a second heartbeat in the reception area, a steady, determined rhythm that never quickened or slowed as the voice that matched it rose or fell. Carole.

They had met one month ago, when she first became one of Foggy's clients. They began seeing each other outside the office one week later.

He knew from the music in her voice and the softness of her hair in those rare moments he had been lucky enough to touch it that she was beautiful—or so he chose to believe. They could not meet frequently, so they fit a lot into the little time they had. But for all the intimacy of their few hours together, she had never allowed—and probably never would allow—the touch of his hand where it could give him the truth of her face.

"Good morning, Matt."

He hung his cane on the corner coatrack. "Carole."

"I tried calling you last night." Her voice was tight, coming up from the back of her throat. "No answer."

"I was working late." Not altogether a lie.

"Then why didn't I get through to you here? You said there was a link between your office and the apartment," she said. "You told me your calls were automatically routed here if you weren't home."

"I was in a meeting," he said, "with a client." Now, a lie. For a moment, he resented her for it.

He sensed Foggy behind him in the doorway.

"Why don't you come in now, Mrs. Lehrman? And you, with the shades, get to work." There was an attempt at lightness in his voice that didn't succeed.

"Yes, massa," Matt replied, instead of the genial obscenity that formed itself in his mind. Carole would not have minded but Miss Meyerson might have knocked over the percolator. After five years in their employ, she was still that way. Excitable old woman.

He settled himself at his desk and started in on the *amicus curiae,* his mind wandering with annoying regularity in the direction of the wall between his office and his partner's. The voice that had reminded him of Andy Devine when he had first heard it droned on, reciting for the God-knew-how-many times the intricacies of getting a will out of probate.

Matt reflected that Carole was a bright woman. He felt a pang of guilt at his condescension the moment he thought it. But why, then, so many meetings at which Foggy, ever the patient dutiful attorney, repeatedly explained the nature of his client's position, a concept which was surely within her grasp?

Carole Lehrman's recent widowhood did not seem to have dimmed her intelligence or blunted her perceptiveness any more than it had dulled her appetites. Matt had come to appreciate the former the first night he had had occasion to appreciate the latter. She had refused to patronize him. She had made a teasing remark about expecting him to excel at what was customarily done in the dark anyway. She had seemed totally unselfconscious as she had said it, and he had begun to love her a little for it then and there.

Carole seemed to understand instinctively the way things always had to be between Matt Murdock and his friends. It wasn't enough to abstain from pity because they respected him. They had to forget he was blind and treat him accordingly. The funny thing was that sometimes he would do things they believed only a sighted man could do and they really did forget, and that brought them up short and made the funny thing an irony, because then they were reminded of his blindness.

They knew they had to forget his handicap, but they thought it was because he was just so damned stubborn, so fiercely proud. They didn't know he merely demanded what he deserved without telling them why he deserved it. Of course, he couldn't tell them, because the cane, the glasses, the window dressing would be there to put the lie to whatever he might say. In any case, the concessions to their notions of

what he was were made to preserve his other self.

He had met Franklin P. Nelson in law school. They were both first-year students. Matt had started out calling him Frank in their study group for Professor Hardesty's course in matrimonial until he had said that his friends called him "Foggy." Matt had thought he had said "Froggy," promptly placing himself outside that circle of friends. Another student's explanation that the nickname had started out earlier that year as "Foghorn" and had been shortened to simply "Foggy" cleared up the misunderstanding but did little to clear the air.

One evening the group got into a heated debate on the existence of precedents for awarding husband's alimony. Nelson took the floor and addressed himself to the points Matt had just finished making. He tore Matt's arguments to shreds in an eloquent and biting oration, filling Matt with a grudging respect that made Matt's ears burn. Nelson concluded by saying that Matt would have to be blind not to see the truth of Nelson's argument. After a moment of uneasy silence, both men began to laugh at the same time. The following year they shared an apartment off campus, and four years later they went into practice together.

That was the way it was between Matt Murdock and his friends. They had to forget he was blind. And sometimes they actually pulled it off. All except Karen. The two of them had finished without his ever understanding what his sightlessness had meant to her. All these years later, he was still wondering what his insistence upon being treated as a "normal" man had done to destroy the foundation on which she had built her love for him. He was certain that if he could just figure out how he could have driven her three thousand miles away, he would be all right; he would be able to let go of her memory for good. But he knew just as certainly that he never would, and it would be up to Carole to take Karen's face from his dreams.

As he stacked the sheaf of papers neatly atop his desk blotter, it occurred to him that Carole was especially adept at the things one had to do to be close to Matt Murdock. Paradoxically, that entailed maintaining a distance—something Carole was very good at indeed. Probably because she had her own secrets. She kept her distance as much for her own sake as for his. A perfect illustration of the golden rule.

Her heartbeat grew louder in the open doorway.

"Lunch?" he said as he fastened the papers into a binder.

"Sorry. Too much to do today." It was flat, expressionless.

"Don't be that way, huh? Okay, so I probably should have called. I got hung up."

He remembered hanging onto the side of the Tishman Building and

wondered when he was going to stop playing these verbal mind games with himself.

"I'm not mad or anything," she said. "It's okay."

"You are mad, and I am sorry. So let's forget it." He rose to put on his jacket. "If I didn't think you were a little touchy this morning, I might suggest that we're even. I mean, there have been some nights when I've listened for a phone ring a few times, too."

"Touché." He could tell she didn't smile.

"I bet you think you're lucky I'm not representing you," he said.

"It would be the first time you wouldn't have to defend yourself in order to have a fool for a client." She stepped inside and closed the door behind her.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just that . . . maybe this wasn't such a good idea—us, I mean." She sat in the chair opposite his desk—heavily, from the sound of the leather. He was forced to sit again. "It wasn't very fair of me."

"You talk as if we were something you dreamed up all by yourself."

She lit a cigarette. The cellophane on the pack crinkled in a way that told him her hands trembled.

"Franklin and I finished up this morning," she said. "The estate should be settled by the end of the month." She exhaled. "He'll probably have to send his bill to St. Croix."

"I'll see you again?"

"I really don't know." She sounded apprehensive. Her pulse rate quickened slightly. He couldn't help thinking that in scenes like this it was the one in his position who was supposed to be scared. He had a penchant for melodrama that made its presence felt at the worst times.

"I just wanted to tell you—" She stubbed out her half-smoked cigarette abruptly and stood. "I don't know what I came here to tell you. Let's just leave it like this, okay?"

He started to say something to her and she asked him not to before she gently closed the door in his face.

He expected Foggy to be lousy company at lunch and he wasn't disappointed. One of the advantages of his unique hearing was that he could tune out specific sounds as easily as he could pick them out from the welter of noise around them. He was tempted to let Foggy's depressing summation of the previous night's events be drowned out by an argument between the waitress and a rowdy customer. Their shouting was audible even here in the restaurant's rear dining room. This morning he had let the sound of running water in the bathroom drown out the bad news on the radio without meaning to.

His hypersensitive fingertips—another gift of radiation—could discern the microscopic thickness of ink on a printed page. This and the ability to sense color in terms of heat—he assumed it had something to do with the absorption of light—allowed him to read from well outside the meager braille bibliography to which the conventionally blind were limited. Still, he had to read by touch, and from across the room, the headline of Foggy's newspaper could not tell him what he would have had to know to anticipate the full weight of his partner's mood.

The headline would have confirmed his worst fears of the night before. Peter Markesson had died in the fire, his wife Helen was in critical condition at Lenox Hill Hospital with third-degree burns over much of her body, and the bodyguard who could have gotten them out in time had not been in the connecting room. As of eight this morning, the fire department had still been picking through what was left of the suite, but it was clear that the men would not find a second body.

And while Foggy, with three martinis in him, could make black jokes about losing a fee and being out one advance to the bodyguard, Matt knew that this time Foggy had allowed himself to care too much. He had been genuinely fond of the Markessons. And both he and Matt knew there was little chance they would come across the bodyguard in any place that wasn't a morgue.

Helen Markesson had worked as a high-level secretary for an investment counseling firm in Chicago. She had been working nights toward a management degree at U.C. Circle, and had picked up enough about finance—far more than her employers realized—to spot the subtle indications of several well-concealed improprieties. Quite unwillingly, she found herself learning more and more about the business practices of Norback, Perry, Clark, and Shaw each day. Foggy had said that Helen's suspicions, once formed, were difficult to dispel, and that hers was the kind of mind whose subconscious would continue to draw conclusions despite the best efforts of her conscious to censor it.

Eventually, Helen discovered that her employers were making sizable investments for their clients in what turned out to be dummy corporations. From that discovery, it required only the most rudimentary deductive skills to arrive at the conclusion that organized crime was implicated. And, unfortunately for Helen Markesson, hers was also the kind of mind that clung tenaciously to notions which were regarded by the society she lived in as outmoded and dangerous. Helen clung to notions about things like civic duty and personal integrity.

Helen's nervous testimony before a federal grand jury resulted in a lengthy investigation into the dealings of Norback, Perry. It did not result in any indictments. Meanwhile, the Markessons were—to use the quaint terminology of the Justice Department—"enrolled" in the Federal Witness Protection Program, which resulted in their relocation, under aliases, in three different western cities in a period of sixteen months. In no instance did the Justice Department furnish the promised identification papers—the birth certificates, the employment histories and the like—that were to accompany their new names.

It was not until they had been relocated in a small town north of Albany, New York, and a budget cutback reduced the Markesson's bimonthly stipend from the government to a figure slightly less than three hundred dollars, that Peter and Helen decided to leave the program. They knew they would risk reprisals from the organized-crime syndicate that was allegedly involved with Mister Norback and his partners.

Because Helen also had outmoded and dangerous notions about things like self-reliance and self-worth, she found it difficult to understand how she, who had successfully held three executive-secretary positions prior to her employment by Norback, Perry, and her husband, who had been a seventy-five-thousand-a-year account executive with J. Walter Thompson, had come to be living in two rooms in the basement of a two-family house and doing the laundry in the bathtub.

By the time they made a difficult trip down to Manhattan to consult Franklin P. Nelson, Peter and Helen Markesson had lost close to sixty pounds between them. And by the time Foggy decided he was willing to play a long shot and institute a breach-of-contract suit against the protection program administrators, alleging that their representations to the Markessons constituted a verbal contract, Helen was able to make jokes again. Foggy would chuckle politely when she would remark that licking food stamps left a bad taste in her mouth.

"They knew the risks involved when they left the program, right?" Foggy was asking as Matt started in on his dessert. "I told them that whatever action I would—" He belched. "—Bring would prob'bly get a lot of publicity. And their real names would get in the paper. Couldn't he helped."

"Take it easy," Matt said. "Helen was a grown woman. She could make up her own mind. She knew she was taking a chance when she testified in the first place."

"For God's sake, will you stop talking about her in the past tense?"

Matt motioned for the waitress and wished he could see the

woman's face. The waitress was probably wondering how Matt had known what direction to gesture in.

"Okay, okay," he said. "Jeez, I hope you have a clear calendar this afternoon."

"After Carole left, I told the old bat out front to cancel everything. The only appointment I have now is with the couch in my office."

"Good move. I didn't think you'd do this to yourself if you had to be in court today." He handed the check to Foggy. "If you can't read this, we're in trouble." Foggy snorted as he took the check. "Look, I'm really sorry to hear all this," Matt said.

Matt hadn't heard the news that Peter had died, that much was true. But he knew about the fire bombing at the Hilton. His other self had been on the scene.

There were others like him, men and women gifted by strange meanderings of fate with powers no one seemed to understand; men and women who went out in Halloween clothes to tilt at windmills.

He had met one or two of them on occasion and they had compared notes. It appeared that all of them were accepted by the authorities when they first showed their made-over selves in public. The lawmakers and the law enforcers alike allowed them to operate; and if they worked outside the law in that, had they been deputized, their methods would have been proscribed by the rigid code of police procedure, they at least seemed to respect due process, which was enough to make the official lawmen look the other way. But the tacit understanding that allowed these costumed Don Quixotes their freedom to function was based on an uneasy trust.

They all had one thing in common: at the same time that unknown hand had touched them and made them different, it steered them onto a course they could not stray from if they wanted to. It was enough to make a nihilist believe in destiny: it had become clear to these chosen few that there was little question to what end their gifts would be applied. Some of them called it "maintaining order"; others called it "justice." There were a few who were possessed of a metaphysical turn of mind, and they called it "doing good works."

In Matt's case the matter had been both simpler and more complex. His father's decision, arrived at somewhere between the canvas and the ropes, that Matt would follow in his dodging footsteps had turned the old man into a coach. Channeling his son's athletic aptitude into the ring, he trained young Matt tirelessly until the boy became what the old man would call "a fine physical specimen." This was muttered in the same reverential tone as his references to his prime.

The products of the old man's efforts were ripplings of muscle on

his son's adolescent torso that not even the long weeks in a hospital bed could atrophy.

The cancellation of Matt's vision had little effect on his agility or strength. And like all the other processes that were manifestations of his sensory nerves' improved interaction with his brain, his reflexes were sharper than ever. It was in those first few months of sightlessness, when he was only just discovering what he had become, that Matt told himself, with a curious combination of bitterness and awe, that he had indeed been the victim of a freak accident. It had, after all, turned him into a freak.

And what would he do, this freak? What would he do now that he could no longer see in the accepted sense, but the rest of him had compensated for that loss so that he functioned no less efficiently than if he still did see? He would go on as before. Everything, and nothing had changed.

The redheaded kid who wore dark glasses as he worked out on the bag had taken some getting used to down at Stillman's Gym. But eventually the grizzled gray heads would turn to watch in openmouthed fascination, and in a very short while they found that the glasses were the only thing that reminded them the boy was different.

The boxing commission, of course, had more reservations than the crowd down at Stillman's. And the old man remained bitter, unable to believe that the accident had made Matt something better than he had been. Thus Matt learned that though he was not helpless, there were those who would thrust helplessness upon him.

The turning point came when it looked as if Battling Murdock would don his gloves once more. The old man was finally going to get his shot at that big-money bout. And the money could easily have been his. But the money wasn't clean, and the old man would not have made it by winning. His refusal to take the dive as instructed ended Matt's ambivalence toward the fight game and his indecision about the future. It also ended his father's life.

Matt helped find his father's killers and bring them to justice. And those who had assumed he was helpless were proven wrong.

So, the matter had narrowed down to a simple thing that had nothing to do with a carefully reasoned decision. Those strange, incredible powers, the body conditioned by the old man's futile dream, a son's profound sense of loss, and an adolescent need to punish the kind of men who had killed his father forged the other self. The path Matt would walk became quite clear. It forked in two directions: the life of a blind lawyer, always deferred to, always protected despite his pointed demonstrations of his self-sufficience;

and the life of the other, the strange hero to millions who was deferred to without condescension and who needed no protection. The other self was an acrobatic vigilante who had been tagged—in that lurid tabloid style peculiar to New York—"Daredevil."

At the time the suite on the top floor of the Hilton had been hit by a fire bomb thrown in through a window, Daredevil had been moving east over Fifty-First Street by his unique method of travel.

The form-fitting clothing he wore was equipped with a holster which held a billy club. Through an opening in the club's tip, a cable which unspooled at the touch of a spring-lock mechanism in the grip of the club could be released. The cable had a reach of at least half a city block, and its other end was fitted with a small, sturdy grappling hook. With Daredevil's flawless aim, the hook could be anchored on anything high up and available, allowing him to swing an entire block in the time it would take an earthbound man to cross the street. In the absence of any ledge or outcropping, the hook could be used like a mountain climber's piton to imbed itself in concrete or brick, but the procedure was risky.

Ordinarily, hooking the line was an effortless task. The waves which emanated from inside his head could outline the shape of buildings for him with total accuracy. This "radar sense" enabled him to determine the buildings' composition and to gauge their distance from him unerringly.

The citizens of New York had quickly become accustomed to the oddly garbed mystery man hurtling over their heads. How strange could he be to a population inured to the sight of street-corner evangelists and old men who pounded the pavement with drumsticks? But he kept one other secret in addition to the fact that he was Matthew Murdock. The public was jaded, but it was also just paranoid enough to envision all manner of harm to itself if it became known that the man swinging around up there on the end of a fancy rope happened to be blind.

So they were allowed to remain secure in their belief that the man they called Daredevil was as normal as they were. Only a tourist could be found looking upward in amazement at the figure in red bounding from rooftop to rooftop on West Fifty-First Street.

Daredevil's attention was caught by the sound of the explosion immediately. As he followed it in the direction of the Hilton, he became aware of the noise of an engine overhead and a rhythmic flapping sound, like great wings beating the air: a helicopter.

He filtered out both the engine and the churn of the rotary blades and concentrated on the sounds from within the cockpit. The first

things he noticed were the heartbeats. There were three of them, one of them vaguely familiar and all of them in a fine state of tachycardia. Those boys were highly excited about something. Until one of them spoke, Daredevil could only tell himself that the crew of a traffic helicopter would be more dispassionate in its observations.

He alighted atop a building on the west side of Sixth Avenue, across Fifty-Second Street from the hotel. He had to filter out the sound of approaching fire engines. From the time it had taken him to get near the Hilton, he concluded that if anyone had been hurt by the explosion he had heard, it was too late to do anything for them. So he turned his full attention to the helicopter overhead.

"You think Molly got both of them?" one of the voices in the cockpit said.

"There's no way to tell until morning," a voice Daredevil had heard somewhere before replied. It corresponded to the familiar heartbeat.

He removed his grappling hook from the edge of the low retaining wall around the rooftop, and retracted it into the club, preparing it for another use.

"Now what?"

"We go pick up Molly and go back," the familiar voice said. "We tell the man it was a 'go.' Then we wait."

They were within the cable's reach. They probably had their landing lights out. If they were flying so low to begin with, the sound of the 'copter would call more attention to them than they were comfortable with. They would have reasoned that there was no point in making themselves more conspicuous.

The grappling hook struck the undercarriage of the chopper and locked onto one of the landing struts on the first try. He was up the cable and fastened onto the undercarriage like a lamprey without missing a word from the cockpit.

"What if Molly didn't get them both?"

"Will you stop whining? If that's the case, we take another shot."

"Tomorrow, I hope," the whiner said.

"Nope. Tomorrow Doyle wants Nelson."

There was the sound of a long, low whistle and Daredevil imagined the whiner's eyes widening. Somebody was in up to his armpits and what he was in was obviously a hell of a lot heavier than he'd counted on.

The reference to Foggy completed the picture. Daredevil felt a shudder of dread, not so much for this goon squad's victims—he had not known them—as much as for his partner. If the Nelson those guys had on their minds was Foggy, then they had just tried to torpedo the

Markessons. If it turned out they had succeeded, he would handle the danger to Foggy in his own way. He would not worry his partner with it. If the Markessons were dead, Foggy would take it pretty badly.

"Tomorrow? You sure?" the whiner was saying.

"Midnight. Doyle had a man on the inside. The guy couldn't find what Doyle wanted, so Doyle figures it's in the mouthpiece's head. So we go to the oflice, we set the charge, and Thursday morning, Nelson walks in and *bang!* Whatever he's got, he keeps it to himself. *Silencio.* Permanent."

It was Foggy they were talking about, all right. And those guys worked for whoever Helen Markesson was running from. Or a middleman, more likely, a guy who had hired a specialist to torch the Hilton. A guy who had sent his own goons to back up the firebug. Doyle.

And if the Doyle in question was who Daredevil thought it was, he was guaranteed a rough time or two before the whole mess was finished.

There was some mumbling from the cockpit. Not even Daredevil's ears could make it out.

"What's wrong? What's the matter?" The whiner's voice rose in panic.

"We should be up higher. Something's slowing our airspeed. Ain't gonna make it all the way in like this. Feels like we got added weight."

Daredevil could not be sure that there was no way they could see him from the cockpit. He would have to back off; though he had hoped that the chopper would bring him face to face with Doyle that night, he decided the encounter would be worthless if it wasn't going to be on his terms. The waves carried back the information that there was a rooftop less than twenty feet below him. Pretty low for a pass with a helicopter. His weight was dragging them down, but the distance was still a bit much for a straight drop.

The building's façade was stainless steel, his radar told him, and the grappling hook wouldn't do him any good, but he sensed a flagpole just over the edge of the roof. He snapped the cable into place with one hand, readying it for a toss. He had to put all his concentration into it, but he was able to wrap the cable's other end around the flagpole a few times.

Waiting until the chopper was the right distance from the building, he swung his legs down and let go of the landing strut. As he broke away from the helicopter's underbelly he squeezed the trigger in the club's grip that would retract the cable. The chopper was almost directly over the flagpole when he let go. He dropped straight down,

missing the flagpole by inches. As he fell, he clamped his free hand onto the grip, just above his other hand. He felt the pull across his shoulder blades as the cable went taut and he jerked to a stop less than two feet below the flagpole. To catch his breath he let himself dangle there for a full ten seconds before scanning for a ledge. The strain of the wrenching stop had been distributed across both arms. They would be sore for quite awhile, but by morning he would be functional.

There was no ledge! There were only huge stainless-steel panels between the windows. The panels were studded with convex shapes that protruded from the surface at regular intervals. 666 Fifth Avenue, the Tishman Building.

He swung in close to one of the panels and grabbed the edge of it. He remained there, pressed up against the side of the building, for several minutes, in case one of the men in the 'copter was bright enough to look down and see what had caused their temporary weight problem. He was sure it was dark enough so that staying close to the building would conceal him. After awhile the sound of the helicopter faded in the distance.

The next day he went to lunch with Foggy after Carole Lehrman left the office, and Foggy got quietly drunk as he told Matt that Peter Markesson was dead.

Matt returned to the office in an irritable mood. He hadn't left the courthouse until 6:15. Judge Palmieri had a crazy thing about handicaps, and he seemed to regard the concept of a blind trial lawyer as a mockery of the entire judicial system. The first time he had heard one of Matt's cases, he had made some strange remark about how he hadn't recognized Matt without a set of scales in one hand. Ever since, Matt had been unable to go up before Palmieri without remembering that remark. He still didn't know just what the hell Palmieri had meant by it.

So it had been a few hours of unfriendly sparring, with Palmieri denying motions and overruling objections before Matt could finish making them. Matt hoped that if someone were going to get that dangerous old crackpot off the bench, they would do it before Matt got an ulcer.

Foggy was still on the couch when Matt got back and it took almost twenty minutes to get him up and into his coat. Evidently, the receptionist had given up over an hour ago.

After some of her cold but still-formidable coffee, Foggy said he felt refreshed. He had had a very satisfying dream in which he had fired Miss Meyerson.

Alone, Matt was grateful for the coffee. It was a long wait for midnight. Twice he took the red Spandex leotard and tights out of the false bottom of his briefcase, and twice he decided against heading out the window and cruising Times Square for muggers. He didn't trust the intelligence of the men in the helicopter enough to believe they'd follow their own plan and arrive no earlier than midnight.

He dialed Carole's number every half hour and let it ring ten times before hanging up. He gave up after the fourth try. When the coffee wore off and the pot was empty, he took the portable alarm clock without the crystal out of his desk drawer and set it to allow himself a two-hour nap. In his present condition, he did not trust his internal time sense to wake him in time.

He awoke long before the alarm. In his dream, plane tickets to St. Croix had danced before his eyes. There had been two of them at first, but then a pair of disembodied female hands had appeared out of nowhere and had torn up one of them. He sat up with a start, rubbing his useless eyes from force of a very old habit. He swore softly to himself and wished he had been blind since birth, so that the image maker that crept inside his head as he slept would have no raw materials. He thought that nightmares made of pure imagination would be preferable by far to any based on reference points from the world as it was.

He wandered around the suite of offices aimlessly, studying the squeak of his new shoes. He had planned to go out into the corridor just before midnight and listen as the men from the helicopter worked. When they had nearly finished, and he knew what they had done, he would approach in his noisy loafers and scare them off. He would defuse the charge they had spoken of and then go off to deal with the man named Doyle.

Upon reflection, he admitted to himself that it was not the sort of plan he would have come up with had he been thinking clearly. He had been tired the night before and a few hours sleep in his own bed had done little to improve his condition. His brief nap on the floor just now had been more hindrance than help; his back was beginning to remind him of his little escapade outside the Tishman Building. No, the squeaky-shoes routine would have to go. In his present condition there would be too wide a margin for error. It would be a good way to get himself killed.

He kicked off the noisy shoes and replaced them with the rubber-soled red boots from the briefcase. He liked their sound much better: barely audible to him, completely silent to anyone else. He would let them break in and get started, then do his version of coming in shooting.

At 11:46 he heard the helicopter just as he pulled his mask into place. He thought for a moment that he might have been wrong about the men in the helicopter. Then he remembered once reading in *National Geographic* about a chimpanzee who had been taught to tell time.

When he heard them on the roof, he took up a position in the alcove beside the elevators. They would have to be coming through the stairwell on the roof, and some rapid mental triangulation told him that the stairway gave onto the corridor at such an angle that a man crossing from the stairs to the door marked "Nelson and Murdock, Attorneys at Law" could not see the alcove.

He did not need the sound of their heartbeats to know when they were about to step into the corridor. Daredevil imagined them congratulating themselves on their stealth and had to suppress a chuckle.

The waves gave him their silhouettes as they worked the lock on the front door. Only one of them matched his height and build, and the shape corresponded to the familiar heartbeat in the helicopter. That tripped the memory like a circuit closing: the man's name was Burgess and he had a right cross old Battling Murdock would have given his left arm for. Burgess' presence meant that Daredevil had pegged Doyle correctly. Daredevil stopped smiling.

He listened for the sound of a tumbler lifting but it didn't come. According to his silhouettes, the smallest of the trio was kneeling with his forehead against the doorknob. The little man was swearing into the keyhole; his twirl was giving him a hard time. Daredevil scanned for a sense of their hardware, and noted that each of them carried a small penlight. So they were going to do this in semidarkness. Good. It would give him an edge.

The fifth skeleton key on the little man's ring opened the door, but he swore anyway. Daredevil held his breath. If they were going into Foggy's office they'd be right on the other side of the alcove. He gave them five minutes, then moved.

The door to Foggy's office was standing ajar. He realized a split second after he pushed through it that he had been wrong about the pen-shaped objects in the men's hands. He felt a slight warmth along the right side of his face just before the trio turned and saw him. It could only be coming from the pole lamp in the corner, near the clock. If they had flashlights . . .

He sensed Burgess' right hand come up quickly. There was a tickling sensation on the left side of his neck, then a bizarre feeling in his throat, hot and cold at the same time, all along his carotid artery; then numbness; then sharp pain. They were each carrying the miniature

equivalent of an electric cattle prod.

For a moment the pain seemed to deaden all sensation in his left side. It cleared in time for him to get his bearings and block Burgess' next pass with the prod. He struck out at the big man with a hard left. It caught Burgess in the sternum and Daredevil thought he could sense the man's features squeeze together like the bellows of an accordion.

The short guy came up at him from under the pole lamp. With one swift, slashing movement, he neutralized the nerve endings in both of Daredevil's legs, from the knees down. As his legs buckled, Daredevil came forward and met the man's nose straight on with a right. He could hear the prod fly out of the little lock picker's grasp as the man toppled over backward into the pole lamp.

Burgess was still wheezing from the pain in his chest, and it gave Daredevil his position. He didn't have to worry about the third man, the whiner, just yet. He had time to reach up from his crouch and knock the prod out of Brugess' hand with a karate chop to his wrist.

The whiner had been circling the action all the while, either waiting for an opening or trying to put off getting involved. Daredevil thought of a buzzard circling a dying calf and was startled by the aptness of the image when the whiner's right hand darted forward and clawed at Daredevil's side. When the hand pulled back, Daredevil felt four deep gouges just below his left rib cage and a burning pain that raced down his side like a brush fire.

The waves flashed a silhouette image at him: a hand dripping blood from four pointed steel finger caps which gave the hand a resemblance to the talons of a predatory bird. If he had needed further proof that he was right about who Mr. Doyle was, he didn't anymore.

He folded over in the direction of the pain and the brassy odor of blood rushed up and struck him in the face. Powerful hands grabbed his shoulders and pulled him up. He knew it was Burgess from the smell of him even before the big man spat in his face and launched him backward with a powerful shove.

He went down against Foggy's desk and the sharp corner of the overhanging glass desk top caught him between the shoulder blades. That was all he could take.

His whole body began to throb with a dull ache as he came to. The fact that the pain in his side was less severe than it had been was small consolation to the rest of him. He suspected that one of his shoulders had been dislocated.

He didn't know where he was, but he was sure he knew whose place it was, and his returning senses only added confirmation. He could tell by the distance of the street noises that he was high above street level,

on what was probably the top floor of a commercial building. He heard footsteps from far away, yet they seemed to be coming from elsewhere in the same room, and the way they echoed suggested a high ceiling. He had to be in a loft.

The moisture in the air told him it was still night, but he could sense none of the subtle warmth of heated tungsten filaments. The room was dark, or—to be more accurate—dim. He barely felt the presence of what little light there was. It seemed to be infrared.

He was lying on something low, flat, and hard: a pallet of some kind, perhaps an army cot. He tried to sit up and the wounds below his left ribs protested. Then he realized that something else was making it difficult for him to rise: his left wrist and right ankle were restrained. He heard the clanking of chain, and realized he was shackled to the legs of the cot, which in turn were bolted to the floor. He untangled himself from the lengths of chain and managed to sit up. A pulling sensation across his abdomen told him someone had bandaged his wounds.

His head did not clear quickly enough. He felt drowsier than he knew he should be. His mouth was dry. Then he fully remembered where he had been and what had happened, and suppressing a momentary panic, he raised his free hand to his face. The mask was still there.

“Calm yourself, old friend. No one has seen your face.” A rambling, wheezing voice that sounded as if it came from deep within nitrate-encrusted catacombs. A familiar voice that spoke haltingly as the lungs behind it struggled for air. “I instructed my men to refrain from —how shall I say?—invading your privacy. That and allowing you to live were courtesies I wished to extend you, so that, if need be, I can rescind them.”

The heartbeat that matched the voice was slow, plodding, irregular. This grossly overweight man was Orson Doyle. He suffered from emphysema as well as photophobia—an acutely painful sensitivity to light—that forced him to live as he did, enduring rooms no better lighted than a photographer’s darkroom. This curious affliction lent itself to the pseudonym by which his intimates knew him, the Owl.

“Owl,” Daredevil whispered. He heard the corpulent body settle into a chair opposite the cot.

“If you insist. There are precious few whom I permit to address me thus. Now you are one of them. Another courtesy.” His voice had lost none of its rotund quality since their last meeting, nor had Orson Doyle himself lost any of his fondness for the florid phrase. “I seem to be in an unusually expansive mood this morning.”

“Wonderful.” Daredevil shifted on the cot and clutched his side. “I’ll

remember you in my will for that."

"Which kindness I hope I shall not reap for many years hence." Doyle lit a cigar. The slowness with which he came to the point was his own exquisite brand of torture. "I trust you're comfortable, old friend? You'll forgive me if the manacles are not quite your size. When one has unexpected company, one must make do with what is at hand."

"Just as long as they don't leave a green ring when you take them off," Daredevil said.

Doyle made a disparaging noise.

"Why am I here?" Daredevil winced as he pulled himself to the edge of the cot. "They could have killed me easily."

"And I would have remained forever ignorant of whatever information is shared by the . . . concerned parties," Doyle said. "Wouldn't I?"

"What information? If you don't mind, Cuddles, I'm not quite up to ring-around-a-rosy just now."

"Perhaps not. But you were up to something." Doyle began to chuckle. It turned into a cough. "My men report you did not come in through a window. You entered from the outer office. That would indicate that you were lying in wait for Mr. Burgess and party. You must know something about the, ah, project which occupies us at present."

"Mm. So now I get to sit through the bamboo-shoots-under-the-fingernails routine, right?"

"Ah, no. You've suffered quite enough. Which I truly regret, old friend."

Daredevil touched his wounded side gingerly. Doyle must have noticed.

"You must forgive Rooster," Doyle said. "He tends to be a bit . . . overzealous with those sharp little toys of his. You know, you very nearly exhausted our supply of antibiotics—and painkillers, for that matter. Not enough to make you comfortable, mind you. Just enough to keep you from losing consciousness most of the time."

Painkillers. No wonder he was so sluggish.

"And you're quite fortunate you have not lost more blood." Doyle leaned far back into the chair; it sounded like crushed velvet upholstery. "If you manage to leave here alive, I'd have that looked at. It might require stitches." There was a long pause. "So. You've suffered enough. Answer the questions I put to you completely and truthfully, and you will suffer less. Decline to cooperate or dissemble in the slightest, and you will suffer more."

“You’re nothing if not fair.” Daredevil sensed that someone else had appeared in the room. Burgess. He stood behind the cot. “You’re telling me that I can leave here alive. But somehow, Doyle, coming from you that doesn’t fill me with a whole hell of a lot of optimism.”

Doyle ignored him. “How you know about Helen Markesson?”

“Never heard the name before in my life.” Doyle’s question confirmed the last of Daredevil’s suspicions.

“Incidentally,” Doyle said, “we noted when we examined you that your right shoulder has been dislocated.” He snapped his fingers.

Burgess stepped up to the cot swiftly and grabbed Daredevil’s free arm. He twisted it behind Daredevil’s back.

Doyle spoke in measured tones, barely concealing his mounting fury. “What is your connection with the Markessons? I will not ask again.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Another twist. He clamped his teeth together tightly to keep from screaming.

“Very well,” Doyle said. “Let us try another tack.” He sighed. “What do you know about Arthur Norback?”

There was one other time besides when he was dreaming that Daredevil saw things. When he was in excruciating pain, bursts of bright-colored light seemed to appear inside his head. It was like watching a Fourth of July fireworks display.

Doyle waited patiently for Daredevil’s answer. Daredevil remained silent. He was busy watching the fireworks.

“Mr. Doyle, sir,” Burgess said between twists, “I don’t think we’re getting anywhere this way.”

“Thank you, Arnold,” Doyle said. “I was aware of that. Now, alas, there is only one way to end this. Release him.”

Daredevil seemed to black out and come to again repeatedly, swimming in and out of consciousness as Doyle’s men carried him into a corridor. In a brief moment of wakefulness, he sensed that the shackle had been removed from his left wrist and placed on his left ankle instead. He felt the weight of chains dangling from his feet as they carried him, and assumed that the chains had been removed from the cot. He suspected the chains were going to be reattached elsewhere.

There was a deep boring pain between his shoulder blades and a fire burning in his gut when he came to one more time. With a momentary sense of detachment, he noted the curious fact that it was pain that kept making him lose consciousness, and pain that kept rousing him again. Then his capacity for analysis left him, supplanted

by an awareness of nothing but agony. The painkillers were wearing off.

The stabbing sensation in his back came from the fact that his arms had been pulled behind him and tightly bound together at the wrists by a length of rough cord. He felt blood rush into his head and became aware of the way his body seemed to sag as if a weight pulled him downward. He realized that the fire in his belly was merely referred pain from the wounds in his side. The wounds were being stretched open further by the pull of gravity. He was hanging upside down.

He heard the sound of grinding gears and the squeaking, rubbing noise made by a greased cable moving along a pulley. He heard Doyle's voice from somewhere behind him, echoing as if Doyle were speaking down a well.

"I told you that if you declined to cooperate, you would suffer more. I'm sure you wondered at the time how that was possible. Regrettably, you are about to find out."

The waves were weak, diluted by the pain that made Daredevil's skull throb, but they told him that the chains had been shortened considerably. Their other ends had been secured to spikes driven into the walls on either side of him, at points above his head.

Now he became aware of the pain in his legs and the full weight of his predicament became clear to him. His mind developed a picture of himself hanging there from his ankles like a prisoner in a medieval dungeon.

He actually appeared to be in a well; or, at any rate, some kind of long, narrow enclosure whose walls, his radar told him, were composed of brick and mortar. Like a well, or a chimney, or God help me, he thought—an elevator shaft.

The Owl raised his voice to be heard above a brief sound of whirring and grinding from below. "A fascinating building, this one," he said. "Some time ago, the owners wanted to install a modern elevator, you know, one of those ugly, sterile boxes with fluorescent lighting, the very thought of which makes my eyes—well, never mind my eyes.

"The other tenants and I persuaded the owners to reconsider. We convinced them such an 'improvement' would spoil the building's charm. And so the ancient relic, which will be your last sight in this life, remained.

"They had to install safety locks on all the access doors. The doors used to be the sort that could open onto an empty shaft—the sort that have since been banned. Every few years, some poor wretch was falling in and killing himself. But there were ways around the safety

feature. Particularly with the sort of help I employ."

Daredevil sensed the little man, Rooster the lock picker, standing beside Doyle.

"Oh, and I must say we had quite a time with you," the fat man continued. "You missed most of it, I'm sorry to say. Throughout the ordeal of, ah, stringing you up, you remained oblivious, secure in the embrace of Morpheus. Or should I say morphine?" He allowed himself a rich peal of laughter. This time, he did not cough.

Morphine. Which explained why the pain was coming back with a vengeance.

"There are, of course, simpler, more efficient ways to kill a man," Doyle said. "But I did promise you suffering, and a promise is a promise. There is also the matter of some years of unpleasantness in Creedmore—hardly a place for a man of my breeding—for which I hold you directly responsible. Not to mention the many times we have gone this route before, with, shall I say, a fair amount of unsuccess on my part. I cannot contain my great glee at having the opportunity to correct my record of failure. Ah, yes, my dear, old friend, I owe you much.

"This elevator is generally quiet at this ungodly hour of the morning, and I have urged my men to use the stairs for the bit of business they have yet to complete. But a certain Mr. Molly, who is expected here shortly to collect the payment due him, has been instructed to use the elevator.

"I owe you. God, how much I owe you! And when this quaint old machine makes its way to this floor, first crushing your skull and then pulping the rest of your miserable body against the top of the shaft, you may consider my account paid in full."

The fat man and his short companion turned on their heels, and Daredevil heard the grate of the safety door sliding into place.

The morphine, or whatever had been in his system, had completely spent itself now, and he was left alone to unimaginable agony. Yet, like the effect that the certain knowledge of approaching death sometimes has on the profoundly religious, with the pain came a kind of calm. He was certain that he would not black out again. And he was more certain still that his suffering would somehow give him additional strength, that he would get out of this when clearly such a thing was impossible. Yet what he was—the fact that he was blind and yet could do the things he could—this, too, was impossible, or it should have been. Somehow, it all seemed to fit.

Doyle, Burgess, none of them knew about the waves. If they had known he was blind, they would have thought it so much the better. Surely the very slim chance that he could escape this trap, as he had

done all the others, would be infinitesimal if he were blind. They would not know about the waves, and how they enabled him to do something that was quite beyond a man with even the keenest vision: with the waves, he could effectively see behind him. He could see the way his wrists strained against each other; he could sense the exact point at which he should exert pressure against the cord. He could feel the knot weakening in a way no one else could. And he could free his hands in less than a minute and a half.

He forced himself to think about other things and not the way his fingers now dug into the walls of the elevator shaft, groping for purchase in the space between the bricks. He jammed his fingertips into the mortar so hard that he was reminded of how long it had been since his last manicure. He realized there would be blood inside his gloves, and shook himself free of the thought so he could dwell on something else.

He thought of Foggy, of all the years the two of them had spent sharing a succession of small rooms and big dreams, locked up with the smell of each other's sweat and never once complaining. He thought of Foggy's kindnesses over the years, kindnesses extended not to a blind man but to a friend who only happened to be blind. Then he thought of Foggy in a refrigerated drawer, probably right next door to Peter Markesson.

He thought of Carole, of how his last memory of her was of the mysterious chill in her voice as she closed the door to his office. He thought of his silly romantic fantasy, the one in which he ran to the airport, racing onto the tarmac if necessary, to stop a plane departing for St. Croix. Then he thought about not getting a chance to try the fantasy on for life-size.

And he thought of the men from Vegas, and the way the veins in their temples had throbbed under the single bulb in his father's dressing room as they told the old man what he had done to their sure thing. He thought of their granite faces, all of them curiously more askew than his father's battle-scarred mug, faces livid red above black cashmere coats and white silk scarves. He thought of how their brilliantined hair had been as black and shiny as their limousines. He thought of how there had been five of them. Then in his mind he renamed them: Norback, Perry, Clark, Shaw, and Doyle.

He thought of all this so he could ignore the terrible things he was doing to his body as he pulled himself up so that his trunk was perpendicular to the safety door. From that position, he was able to reach up with one hand and grab the elevator's main cable, which his splayed legs straddled. Hand over hand, he pulled himself further up, until his nose was level with his knees, and wondered how in hell he

was going to free his ankles from the shackles.

He heard footsteps on the stairs next to the elevator. Three pairs. He scanned for the heartbeats and learned that Burgess, Rooster, and the whiner were leaving. He had a feeling that they had a rendezvous with Helen Markesson at Lenox Hill Hospital. That left the Owl here alone. Urgent phone calls to the hospital and to the police could solve the problem with Helen. But the damned shackles remained.

The solution, he considered, might lie not in the shackles but higher up. If he could exert a greater pull on the chains than the weight of his body had done, he might be able to dislodge the spikes from the wall. But how was that possible? And if he pulled with both hands, he'd end up dangling from one leg when the first spike came free.

He knew a little about the way mountain climbers used their pitons from the research he had done while developing his grappling hook. The pitons were lodged in the face of a cliff at an angle, so as to be resistant to the downward pull exerted by the climber's line. But they dislodged comparatively easily when the climber reached down from above and yanked them out at the same angle at which they'd been driven in. So the key to his problem lay in getting up to the same level as the spikes, or above them, before pulling on the chains.

By the time the top of Daredevil's head grazed the roof of the elevator shaft, it was roughly 7:30. Getting there had been miserable work, and only the prospect of Foggy's violent death from whatever lay in wait for him at his office had kept Daredevil going. If it really was 7:30, he had less than two hours to deal with whatever would be waiting for him outside the elevator and to get to the office ahead of Foggy.

He would have preferred being able to use both hands, but after almost five minutes of steady tugging, the spike came loose. He had pulled against it with his foot as much as he could, but he had needed to squeeze the center cable between his knees to maintain his position. From the sound of the spike hitting the top of the elevator car, he knew that the car was still several stories below.

The second spike was almost out when he heard the elevator start up. It had to be the certainty that time had run out, and the surge of Adrenalin that came with it, that gave him the final burst of strength he needed. As the car approached the floor beneath Doyle's, Daredevil grabbed the cable in both hands and prepared to swing into the safety door. Even if they hadn't taken away his billy club before they strung him up like a sacrifice at a Black Mass, he would have had to do it the way he did. There would not have been time to use his line. He picked the spot on the safety door where he wanted his heels to land, gritted his teeth, and prayed. He swung. The soles of his boots struck the door

hard, and he almost screamed with the pain. The door buckled a bit; that was all. He had to try again.

On the second try, the door groaned and fell over into the corridor. Daredevil landed atop it just as the elevator car creaked to a stop behind him. He did not pause and scan to learn who, if anyone, had come up. The shackles were still around his ankles, and the chains he dragged behind him set up a deafening clatter as he ran for the far end of the corridor. For a wild instant, he thought of Marley's ghost. He knew that if the sound of the door caving in had not been enough to bring Doyle, the rattling of the chains would be.

He heard the double doors at the end of the corridor swing open as he ran toward them. It was Doyle. The corpulent, ponderous figure paused for a moment in the doorway, bewildered. That was all the time Daredevil needed to scan for the top of the door frame. As he leaped upward, the silhouette image of the Owl fully registered: he was holding a thick cylindrical object in one hand.

Daredevil's fingertips clamped onto the tiny ledge along the top of the door frame, and he swung forward into Doyle. He heard the chain snap and the fat man's howl of horror and pain as his head jerked back. The object he had been holding dropped to the floor a split second before he did. Daredevil smelled the odor of blood and realized that quite without meaning to, he had caught Doyle in the face with the end of one of the chains. Possibly in the eyes. He picked up a silhouette image of Doyle writhing on the floor, his hands clutching at his face.

Doyle was a resourceful man, and he had adjusted well to the limitations imposed on him by his sensitivity to light. After living with his handicap for over thirty years, Doyle had grown comfortable with it. Now—or up until now—Doyle was able to maneuver through a barely lighted room effortlessly. Indeed, he could see in such a room almost as well as Daredevil could function in his total darkness.

Daredevil and the Owl had been well but not equally matched. For, despite his namesake, not even Doyle could see in the dark. This time, there had not even been an opportunity to test the match. It all seemed pointless.

Daredevil crouched to retrieve the fallen object and found his billy club. He knelt there for a moment, listening to Doyle's whimpering. In spite of all that Doyle and Doyle's men had done to him, Daredevil could not help the pang of regret he felt at what might become of Doyle. Daredevil could not be certain of it, but from then on Doyle's concern with shielding his eyes from light might have become entirely academic.

At the sound of movement behind him, Daredevil rose quickly,

holding the club behind his back as he turned toward the doorway. He scanned in the direction of the sound and sensed a man who approached and then stopped less than four feet away. In the silhouette of his hand was the silhouette of a .357 Magnum, its barrel level with the bridge of Daredevil's nose.

"Less fancy than a Molotov cocktail," Daredevil said, "but easier to keep under control."

"Huh?" the man said.

"You're the Molly I've been hearing so much about, right?" Daredevil snorted. "Molly. Molotov cocktails. Cute."

The man waved the Magnum in the direction of the doorway. "Back inside," he said.

Daredevil remained where he was. Behind him, Doyle moaned. Daredevil sensed the man's head jerk sharply in the direction of the sound. Immediately he brought up the club and hurled it at the man's hand. The club was an effective projectile when it wasn't dispensing cable, if one knew how to throw it properly. Daredevil knew how to throw it properly.

The Magnum hit the floor and blew a hole the size of a silver dollar in the ceiling. Molly was about to say something when he was interrupted by Daredevil's fist in his face. It was like punching eggshells.

Inside what he took to be Doyle's office, Daredevil found several feet of the same cord Doyle's men had used to tie his hands. He also found enough tapes of what he assumed to be telephone conversations to keep the DA's office working overtime for a week.

He tied up Doyle and Molly, back to back, then found a telephone. He called the hospital and was connected with its director of security as soon as he identified himself. The police were somewhat less cooperative until he told them where he was calling from and what he was doing there. They said they would send a detail over to Lenox Hill and another to Doyle's loft. Daredevil requested an ambulance for Doyle.

When he opened a window, he knew it was 8:15. Even if Daredevil had interrupted Doyle's men in the act of planting the bomb, there had been more than enough time for them to finish the job after he had been taken out. This morning would be just like any other morning to Foggy Nelson. So unless Daredevil or Matt Murdock was there to do something about it, in less than one hour Foggy Nelson would walk into his office and die.

He alighted on the roof of the building at approximately 8:45. Doyle's

loft had been in the heart of the garment district, and Daredevil had had less than fifteen blocks to cross to get to the midtown offices of Nelson and Murdock. He went in through the stairwell on the roof, as Doyle's men had done, and proceeded downstairs with great caution. He made it to the front door and inside without being seen as Daredevil. Fortunately, he did not need the key which was inside, in the pocket of Matt's trousers. Doyle's men had seen no reason to lock the office behind them.

As he stepped inside, it occurred to him with a mixture of annoyance and dread that Miss Meyerson had sometimes been known to come in as early as ten to nine in order to make her coffee that much more lethal. So he made a point of going to his office to dress as Matt Murdock.

He stripped off his red leotard and felt a sensation of coldness across his abdomen as it was exposed to the air. His wounds were bleeding into the bandages. He would keep his jacket buttoned and hope that if Miss Meyerson came in, there would be no red stain seeping through what showed of his dress shirt to cause her to scream.

His telephone began to ring as he walked briskly toward Foggy's office. He ignored it.

He stepped into the office and conjured up the memory of the sounds and shapes of Doyle's men, and the spatial relationships between him and them, them and the room itself. It had been nine hours since he had last been in this room. It seemed like nine years. He noticed he was limping as he walked toward Foggy's desk. His brutalized nerve endings were playing the same ugly theme with some nasty new variations. He realized he was running out of endurance as well as time.

He forced himself to tune out the telephone which refused to quit ringing in the next room. He sat at Foggy's desk and tried to concentrate.

Arthur Norback and the rest of Helen Markesson's former employers —or whoever was behind them—had panicked when the Markessons decided to blow their cover and go public with their suit against the Justice Department. They had hired the Owl to arrange a hit to prevent what Helen knew from coming out at the trial.

Owl and his clients suspected—and rightfully—that the Markessons had told Foggy some, if not all, of what they knew. But just how much, and whether it was enough to risk a second hit, they didn't know. They had sent a man in to look for whatever evidence Foggy may have had, not realizing that Foggy wasn't stupid enough to commit any of the highly volatile information to paper or tape. Without any assurances that Foggy was harmless, Owl and his men

had felt they had no choice but to kill the lawyer as well. Now, somewhere in this office, there was a bomb either timed to go off at a specific moment, or set to be detonated when Foggy performed a certain function.

It was unlikely that the Owl knew about Foggy's compulsive arrival at the same time each day, so an explosive with a timed fuse could be ruled out—for the time being, at least. The charge was probably wired to something in the room, something Foggy was likely to handle in the course of the day.

He began to pull out the drawers of Foggy's desk, ever so carefully, tentatively scanning each one with his radar. Nothing out of the ordinary.

He was checking the closet in the corner behind the door when he noticed again that his phone was ringing. It hadn't stopped. The ringing was playing havoc with his concentration; it had been over twenty-four hours since he had really slept.

Cursing, he ran into his office and picked up the phone. A dial tone. The call had been placed to his apartment and automatically switched over. He punched the warmest button in the row of buttons below the dial.

"Murdock." He had almost answered in Daredevil's voice, but checked himself at the last second. Until he heard himself speak, he had not realized how tense he was.

"Well, I guess I don't need to ask what side of the bed *you* got up on this morning," Carole said in a mock put-upon tone. Her voice was shrill, edgy. She was trying to keep it light, and failing miserably.

"Carole, please, what is it? I'm very—"

She cut him off. "Busy? Must be monkey business, I'm sure. I've been calling since before six. You must be deaf, too—"

He was neither too tired, nor too preoccupied to notice the "too."

"—not to have heard the phone. *Nobody* sleeps *that* soundly. Unless you weren't sleeping." She was talking almost as rapidly as Matt's heart was beating. "What's today, some kind of holiday? It's almost nine o'clock. What are you still doing at home?"

"Carole, for God's sake, I'm at the office. Will you get to the point?" He wondered why in hell he didn't just hang up on her.

"You can't be. At the office, I mean, I'm across the street I didn't see you come in . . ."

He had to fight to keep his voice under control. "Carole, I've been here since . . . very early. Look, it's a long story—"

"I have to talk to you. It's very important. Don't go anywhere, I'll be right up. Don't go anywhere, don't do anything. Please." She hung up.

He slammed down the receiver with a burst of profanity and returned to Foggy's office. It would be the capstone of a life that had not been without its cruel ironies if the woman he loved should be responsible for the death of his closest friend, perhaps getting both herself and him blown up in the process.

He stood where he had been when Burgess had first jolted him with the miniature cattle prod, and concentrated. They had been in front of him, in the corner near the pole lamp. On the left were the huge windows which flooded the room with so much light Foggy didn't even use a desk lamp. He certainly never needed the pole lamp during the day.

To the right of the pole lamp was a potted rubber plant and to the right of it, on the wall, the old clock . . .

Matt took two steps toward the clock and turned toward the doorway as Carole literally ran in.

"Matt, what are you doing in here?"

"Carole, please, go away. I can't talk to you now."

"You've got to. It's important, more important than you know." Her voice was quavering. She paused. "What in God's name have you been doing? You look like hell."

He ignored her and sent the waves out toward the clock. He could not read the numerals on its face without touching it, but he hoped—and it was only hope, for he had had little experience with clocks—that there was enough substance to the hands for him to get a silhouette image.

"Carole, what time do you have?"

She made a sputtering noise.

"Don't ask questions, Carole, just tell me."

"About five after, but—"

"Exactly. I want it exactly," he said. He was almost whispering.

"Nine six, exactly," she said impatiently. "Please, Matt! You've got to come with me—"

"You're sure that's right?" he said.

"Positive! Matt, for God's sake!" She grabbed his arm. Even through his jacket, he could feel the coldness of her hand.

"Now tell me," he said, nodding toward the wall clock, "what time do you see?" But he already knew the answer. The silhouette images of the clock's hands were in the position of 9:04. The clock was old, a Nelson family heirloom. Foggy wound it once a day. Just once, as compulsively as he did everything else. And each day, between one winding and the next, the clock lost one minute of time. Not more than one minute, not less, as if being Foggy's clock had somehow

made it compulsive, too.

The clock was two minutes slow.

Someone had tampered with the clock, and in resetting it he had been off by just one minute.

Matt smiled ruefully. It was not something a blind man would notice—not immediately.

Carole had stepped around in front of him. He could hear her heart pounding wildly.

"Matt," she said, her voice teetering on the edge of hysteria, "I have got . . . to talk . . . to you."

"So talk."

He started to reach out to the clock.

"No, not here—" She must have seen his hand. She screamed at him. *"Don't touch that!"*

It was as if she had slapped him. Suddenly, it was all clear. How tired, how pain-wracked could he have been not to make the connection? He would have had to be . . .

Blind.

He rounded on her, shaking with fury. "You! It was you!" He was screaming at her. From a foot away, he thought he could feel the change in temperature as the blood drained from her face. "You work for Doyle!"

Last night, in the helicopter, Burgess had spoken of "a man inside." But that could just have been Burgess' assumption. It didn't have to be a man.

He grabbed her arms roughly and began to shake her.

"There's a bomb in that clock, isn't there? You came in here, you cased this place, you gave them what they needed—"

"You knew?" She was hysterical now. "How could you know? You couldn't—"

"Never mind what I knew! I can't believe this! You came in here with some crazy-assed story about being a widow, you made me fall in love with you, just to set up my partner? It's insane!"

"I came back, didn't I? What do you think I came here for? I didn't want it to happen, not to you." She had shaken free of his grasp. He sensed her slump to the carpet, her face in her hands. "My husband, the will, that was all real. But I worked for Doyle . . . long time ago, and I couldn't get out from under."

He could feel her gaze on his face. He knew she was looking into his glasses, forgetting he was blind, and reading meaning in the expressionless stare she saw there.

“Matt, dear God, Matt, don’t. You don’t know what it was like. You don’t know what he knew, what he had on me. You don’t know what he could do to me, you can’t possibly know.

“But I never lied to you. Not to you, Matt.” Her voice broke down into ragged sobs. Her words became unintelligible, even to him.

He turned his back on her and picked up the telephone.

When he finished with his calls, she had calmed somewhat. As if to prove she would never lie to him, she confirmed what he already suspected. Every day she had been there for an appointment with Foggy; she had come primarily to observe. Her appointments were always in the morning, and sometimes she would be there early enough to help Miss Meyerson with the coffee. She had had ample opportunity to observe Foggy’s morning ritual at close range.

One morning, when Foggy had gone out to the reception area to take Miss Meyerson to task for some indecipherable message she had left, Carole had crossed around to the middle desk drawer and made wax impressions of two keys she found there: one of them wound the clock and the other opened the clock face, to reveal the delicate inner mechanism. She had not been able to find a key to the office itself.

Foggy was to have arrived at 9:15, begun winding the clock, and detonated a charge that would have been sufficient to reduce both his office and the reception area to smoking rubble.

Foggy arrived at 9:15 to find a tense Matt Murdock waiting for him in his office and a tearful Carole Lehrman sitting on his couch. Matt explained as best he could while they waited for the bomb squad and the arresting officer to arrive. If Foggy noticed any blood on Matt’s shirt, he didn’t mention it.

They were alone, the three of them, for almost fifteen minutes. Last night, Foggy had gone home refreshed, called Miss Meyerson at home, and fired her.

At 9:30, Foggy went into the largest room and met the seemingly unending stream of secretaries, paralegals, and 3-L’s as they arrived to tell them the office would be closed for the day. He was in there a long time, longer than he needed to be.

Alone with Carole, Matt found the strength to sit beside her. He took her hand in his. It was limp.

“I can refer you to someone who can give you a good defense,” he said.

“I want you,” she said.

“No you don’t. You’re not a complete fool, Carole. If you really wanted me, I finally would have a fool for a client.” He couldn’t tell

how she reacted. “And if I took your case, you’d have a fool for a lawyer.” He wanted to hurt her with this play on her own words.

“I never meant it to turn out like this,” she said. “I loved you, Matt, in spite of myself. I wanted to love you. I wanted to take care of you.”

He stiffened. “It always comes down to that, doesn’t it?”

“And what’s wrong with it?” she said. “It comes out of love, isn’t that enough?”

He shook his head.

“I have to go,” he said, and as he stood up he knew it was truer than he realized. He needed to collapse, he *would* collapse. But most of all he wanted to lock a door behind himself somewhere and stay there for a very long time. Instead, he must invent an explanation for why a blind lawyer would have a dislocated shoulder, pulled ligaments in both legs, and four deep puncture wounds under his left rib cage. A hospital would want to know how this happened.

He had his hand on the doorknob when she ran to him. They embraced. He reached for her face, and this time she did not turn away. She let his fingertips trace the contours of her face.

They reminded him of Karen’s.

THE X-MEN

CHILDREN OF THE ATOM

by MARY JO DUFFY

Inside the bunker, it was almost completely silent. The only sounds were the soft whir of monitoring devices, the blips and pings of radar and sonar, and the low-voiced murmurs of the men and women operating the equipment. The tension among them all was noticeable; not that there was any real reason to be nervous, of course. General Waverly knew that better than anyone. This morning's missile test was completely safe, absolutely routine. But that didn't change what the people around him were obviously feeling. Ah, well, the general supposed philosophically, people would always react like that to atomic weapons, as long as the specter of the thousands who'd died at Hiroshima and Nagasaki still haunted human memory.

But, despite his presence, this morning's test was not military in nature. It was a practice test, being performed with the knowledge and cooperation of the Russians and the Chinese, each of whom was even now preparing to launch similar missiles from different locales. Their purpose was to test out new systems for the guidance, or if necessary, abortion of nuclear weapons in case of sabotage. That is why what happened next was clearly impossible.

The general glanced at his watch impatiently. The missile had been in flight about thirty seconds, arcing up and over the desert wastes, before he noticed the first signs of trouble. Not with the missile itself. He couldn't see anything amiss there; nothing was visible through the highly shielded glass, of the bunker's window, and the blips and signals on the various pieces of monitoring equipment meant nothing to him. What did mean something was the first sign of genuine

anxiety among the men and women reading those monitors—the looks they were exchanging.

"What is it?" he demanded. "What's wrong?"

At first none of them answered him, more intent than ever on their equipment. Then one technician, whose name tag read "Benson" shifted uneasily in his chair. "It may be nothing, sir."

"What may be nothing?"

"The missile, sir, it's . . ."

"What?"

"Well, sir, it seems to be veering slightly off its course; nothing to worry about yet. I don't know if it's a malfunction, or if the calibrations were slightly off."

"You don't know? Now listen, soldier . . ." (In the heat of the moment, Waverly had forgotten that Benson was a civilian, and not under his command.) "A minute change in direction at this end could put that bird miles off its course before it lands. Do you want to see it end up in a populated area? Use your radio controls now, before it's too late. Override the missile's programming and guide it down from here."

"I'm already trying that, sir," another technician told him unhappily. "I don't understand this. All of our equipment indicates that the missile is still functioning perfectly. It doesn't . . . it doesn't seem to want to respond."

"Jesus, God!" Benson interrupted devoutly. Waverly turned toward the radar monitor. Now even his untrained eye could follow the change in course as the "blip" that represented the missile curved across the screen. "We have no other choice. We'll have to destroy it." Benson slipped open the box marked "abort," and punched the button inside it.

Nothing happened.

Close to panic, Waverly shoved Benson aside and punched the button himself, several times.

"It's as if it had a mind of its own," the second technician repeated quietly. "All systems still read green. It just doesn't want to respond."

"It's going down," someone else added.

Now all was silent in the bunker, everyone watching the monitors as the missile turned groundward, toward its own destruction.

The nuclear pyre it set off on landing was spectacular, visible for miles, but miraculously, no one was there to see it, or be consumed by it. The bird had come down into empty desert, twenty miles from its intended target.

And the world could only wonder why.

• • •

Salem Center, New York, was a fairly typical town in Westchester County, quiet and clean and rather small, little more than a dropping-in spot for the residents of the area, most of whom came from nearby colleges or from one of the large, peaceful estates that dotted the countryside. That was what Westchester was famous for, of course. Its pastoral "quietude," and the number of small schools and large green estates scattered throughout.

A few miles outside of Salem Center was a large tract of property that doubled as a private college, Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters, if one read the school charter, and an estate, home of Professor Charles Xavier.

The estate was much like all the others in that area, spacious, with extensive lawns, trees, and rolling hills. Xavier's home, the only structure on the property, was a large white mansion, with tall pillars in the front and gardens in the back. The home was set far back from the main road, accessible only by a narrow, winding driveway and almost hidden by trees and shrubs, so that few of Xavier's neighbors had ever seen it. And none of them had any idea what its façade might conceal. In fact, such was the air of mystery surrounding the place that few people ever knew that it *was* a school. Those who lived there seldom came into Salem Center, and the neighbors hardly ever saw any of them, but there were rumors that the number and identities of the other people in the house changed from time to time. It didn't really matter. In Westchester, and in Salem Center in particular, people minded their own business. They knew Professor Xavier, and they knew he owned the house, and that was enough.

Xavier was a good neighbor. He kept up his property very nicely, and was kind and courteous when he came into contact with other people (which seemed to be only when he couldn't avoid it). He was confined to a wheelchair, poor man; had been for as long as any of the townspeople could remember, although no one had ever heard him complain about his disability. He was in his late thirties, quite handsome too, despite the fact that he was bald. Somehow, his lack of hair served only to emphasize his fine features, and make him seem even more like a professor.

Of course, his attitude helped his academic image somewhat. Although Xavier was always polite to people, he seemed to be slightly disinterested in them. He was aloof, cool, and controlled, as if he constantly drew upon some core of inner strength. There was something uncanny about him, too, that people could feel while they talked to him, as if he could see the truth behind what people were saying—as if he could read their minds.

What none of Charles Xavier's terribly nice, terribly friendly neighbors realized was that he really *could* read their minds.

It amused him, occasionally, when he ran into people, to scan their thoughts and realize how close these fancies of theirs, quickly discarded as outlandish, sometimes came to the truth. It was easier for people to attribute anything eerie they might notice about the professor to bitterness over his disability, to his high intelligence, even to his baldness, than to accept that they might, in fact, be dealing with a man of extremely strong telepathic abilities. If any of them ever began seriously to consider Xavier's oddness, then he very subtly planted in their minds the idea that they were right in the first place, and that any guesses they might make about the professor or his students were mere foolishness.

Xavier's superhuman mental abilities were not something he had acquired; they had been born within him, the result of a minute alteration in the structure of his genetic material. The cause of this change was unknown, but it made him different from either of his parents, from any of his ancestors, indeed from the rest of the human race. Charles Xavier had risen above the category of *Homo sapiens* to be classed with the new group: *Homo superior,* that small, but growing minority whose very name struck fear into the hearts of the public. He and all of his students were *mutants.*

It was Xavier's realization that he was a mutant, and that he could help his fellow mutants to cope with their own special abilities and with humanity's unreasoning fear and hatred of those who were different, that had led him to found this school. He called the young people he trained there "X-Men," not only for "Xavier's Men," but also for "Men with eXtra Power."

In the beginning, it had been difficult for Xavier to find students. He read the papers and watched for news of young people who seemed to have unusual abilities, particularly in areas where nuclear power had been in use. Radiation has always been a primary cause of genetic mutation, and instances of mutation had been on the increase since the discovery of atomic weapons. But even after Xavier found a mutant, his fight was only half over. Some young mutants didn't realize what they were, didn't want to admit that they were different, even to themselves, and became angry when Xavier approached them, unwilling to change their peaceful lives on the word of this crippled stranger.

The lot of the other group was even more unhappy. These were the mutants who'd revealed their powers to those around them, and had been hounded for it, pursued and frightened until they were afraid to trust anybody.

That was the one thing common to every mutant. Happy or unhappy, until they met Charles Xavier, each one thought he or she was alone.

The knowledge that they were not alone, that there were, in fact, others like them, and the sense of responsibility that he tried to instill in them, toward each other and toward the whole human race, were Charles Xavier's greatest gifts to his students. The training he gave them, in working with each other as members of a team, and in the perfecting of their own unique abilities, was what helped them to meet that responsibility whenever the need arose.

The current group of X-Men were not Xavier's first students. There'd been other young mutants in the past. These included the failures, the ones who died using their abilities or who went wrong somehow, became evil, striking out in greed and bitterness, making *Homo sapiens* pay for making the mutants' lot that of outcasts. There were also the graduates, those students who'd completed their training and left the confines of the Westchester School. When that day came, they went out into the world to stand as heroes, protecting mankind from natural disasters, or its own acts of folly, or threats posed by other mutants. Humanity, of course, seldom knew of or appreciated, their vigilance, but Xavier never thought of these students or of all he'd done to help them without a glow of pride.

And yet, he was as proud of his present X-Men as he'd been of any of those in the past. Never had a team shown such tremendous power and potential. Never had the membership been as diverse. These were the first X-Men who were truly capable of protecting the world, because they were its citizens, international in their origins and allegiances.

Cerebro was the breakthrough that enabled Xavier to bring such a group together. Cerebro was his greatest achievement. Gone now were the days of painstaking trial and error, reading the papers, hoping he'd correctly guessed the identity of a new mutant. Gone now the heartache of finding he'd arrived too late to help a fellow mutant, because he hadn't heard of him or her in time. After years of study and work, he had developed a computer so sophisticated that it could detect the output of the type of energy unique to the use of mutant power and pinpoint its location anywhere on the globe.

With Cerebro, he was able to find new mutants, wherever they were, and reach them as soon as the first signs of their powers manifested themselves, usually during the critical period of early adolescence.

But not all of the current X-Men were really youngsters. Banshee, for example, was closer in age to Xavier than to any of his fellow

students. In reality, he was Sean Cassidy, laird of Cassidy Keep on the Irish coast. A normal human, as far as the eye could detect, Banshee had the ability to create extremely strong sonic waves with his voice, waves so powerful that they held him aloft, letting him fly as long as he screamed. Unsure of how to handle his abilities, Cassidy had left the care of his lands and castle to others, briefly trying his hand at crime. Not happy with it, hunted by mutant enemies and normal humans alike, he'd eventually settled into the life of an anonymous drifter, until an appeal from Xavier had convinced him that the X-Men might hold a place for him.

Now, he stood before the professor, wearing the colorful costume he'd adopted, the green suit with the black- and gold-striped glider panels and yellow boots and gloves.

By his side stood the rest of the team.

Wolverine, or "Logan" (only that simple name was listed in the school records), was Canadian, and, like Banshee, he was no longer a youngster. He was short, only an inch or two over five feet, and wiry; and although the cowl he generally wore concealed it, he sported a pair of shaggy sideburns. His costume was yellow, with blue trunks, boots, and gloves, and his mask had very large, vulpine-looking black points on it, like ears. Nature had given Wolverine tremendous strength and stamina, a remarkable healing ability, and senses as sharp as those of his namesake. The Canadian government, hoping to create a national superhero, had given him a skeletal structure of Adamantium, the hardest metal ever conceived, replacing his bones one by one. They'd also given him retractable claws, nine inches long, three per hand, of that same substance. But the deadliest thing about Wolverine was his nature, as fierce and savage as that of his namesake. Not really a team player by nature, he'd jumped at Xavier's offer of membership in the X-Men as an escape from the confining regulations of government work.

Peter Rasputin, called Colossus, was a contrast to his ferocious little teammate in almost every way. Whereas Wolverine was small, Colossus was big, incredibly big, tall, and powerfully built. While Wolverine was a loner, only too glad to leave the Canadian government behind him, Colossus had found it a terrible wrench to answer Xavier's summons and say good-bye to his parents and younger sister, the farming collective where he'd grown up, and his beloved Russia. But most strongly of any of the X-Men did Colossus feel the sense of duty that motivated Xavier himself, and so he had joined the team. He was a tremendous asset to it, too. Not only were his gentle heart and quiet good nature welcome in a group whose members were often abrasive and bitter—wary of getting close to others—but Colossus was one of the strongest beings in the world.

One moment he'd be standing there, Peter Rasputin, wearing hip boots and a colorful red-and-yellow costume; the next he could will a change to come over his molecular structure, so that his body was plated in a thick steel armor that fit as flexibly as it had while it was ordinary skin. This armor was virtually invulnerable, and it gave Colossus the strength of his namesake.

The one X-Man who really helped Colossus get over his occasional homesickness and longing for his family, the one he was closest to, was one of the few members of the team who could match him in power. In reality Ororo was not an X-*Man* at all, but a woman, whose control over the winds and rain had earned her the code name of Storm. Xavier had found Storm in the wilds of Kenya, living in a temple built by tribesmen who worshiped her as the goddess of the weather. Her life there had been a fantasy, sheltered and beautiful, and Storm had been a gentle and generous deity. It had been hard for her to give it up, and live instead the life Xavier had offered her: reality, harsh and dangerous, as a superheroine and a mutant in a world that fears them both. Storm's costume was simple, gold bracelets, a black poncho, hip boots, and a rather ornate headband that she'd worn during her earlier life. The girl herself was breathtaking, as natural and beautiful as the forces at her command, but strange and unearthly, too, with *café-au-lait* skin, flowing, snowy-white hair, and crystal-blue eyes, tip-tilted like a cat's—wise eyes as deep as a lake that has stood since time began.

There was something entirely eerie, and not at all earthly about the German, Kurt Wagner, called Nightcrawler. His appearance was as uncanny as his ability to teleport from one place to another in an instant. Xavier sometimes wondered how young Wagner had escaped being drowned at birth. He looked so strange, so . . . un-human, that he might easily have been taken for a changeling or a demon, rather than a mutant human, and so been killed. He was built like a man, and judging by his bone structure, might have been rather handsome, if his appearance had been normal. Instead, he had fangs, pointed ears, and glowing yellow eyes. A velvety blue fur grew over his otherwise-human features and over the rest of his body, most of it concealed by his red-and-black tights. Under white boots and gloves, Nightcrawler had only two large toes per foot, and a thumb and two fingers on each hand. What contributed most strongly to the strangeness of his demon image was Kurt Wagner's tail—long, forked, and prehensile. Nightcrawler had protected himself for most of his life by joining a carnival, where his frightening traits were just part of the general odd atmosphere. While there, he'd shown considerable skill as an acrobat and had adopted a carefree, devil-may-care attitude toward life in general and danger in particular. It was only after he'd left the

carnival that Nightcrawler had run into trouble. Wandering into a lonely European village one night, from the shadows of the mountains, Nightcrawler was taken for the demon he appeared to be. Too weak and tired to teleport, he might have died that night, at the hands of a mob, but for Professor Xavier, who, alerted by Cerebro, arrived in time to stop the entire village, with a powerful telepathic command, and escape with the young mutant he'd rescued. After this brief and unpleasant experience as a mutant alone in a human world, Nightcrawler was only too happy to start a new life as part of an American-based superhero team. If he was bitter about his past, Nightcrawler concealed it well, under the façade of carnival-acquired sophistication.

Xavier had no doubts at all about the bitterness in the heart of Scott Summers, better known as Cyclops, deputy leader of the team, whose worry about the dangerous nature of his power consumed him. Cyclops had been with the professor since the beginning. He was, in fact, the very first X-Man. He'd stayed with the school long after he himself had graduated, and his friends and classmates had gone out into the word to lead their own lives. Cyclops was invaluable in helping to select and train the new X-Men, and that was ostensibly why he'd stayed with the school, but Xavier, familiar with his students' most private thoughts, knew the truth. Cyclops didn't feel sure enough of himself and his deadly mutant power to go out and live among normal humans. Scott Summers was like a living solar battery, and when fully charged his eyes could generate a force beam powerful enough to rip through solid steel as if it were paper—or to kill, if Cyclops glanced at another human being in an unguarded moment. And so he, a normal-looking and handsome (if somewhat moody) man, remained hidden in Westchester, wearing a blue costume with yellow trunks, boots, and gloves, his eye beams contained behind the all-important ruby-quartz visor, helping his fellow X-Men and oppressed by fear of himself.

Still and all, they were a most satisfactory group, Xavier reflected as he surveyed them, careful not to let his pride show.

"Sir?" Characteristically, it was Cyclops who spoke first.

"What is it, Scott?"

"Why did you call us all here? I assume you must have had a reason . . ."

"Indeed I did," Xavier said ominously. "My X-Men . . . prepare to enter the Danger Room."

For the X-Men, the words "Danger Room" were always a portent. That name signified the ultimate test, of them as individuals, and of their work as a team, and the tests were usually performed under life-

and-death conditions. Xavier never gave them a hint of what to expect when they entered the room, of what new traps and weapons he had installed, or whether this would be a test for them all, or focus on the training and abilities of one particular member. Whatever was in store for them, any X-Man who entered that room while not at the peak of his performance was risking both his own life and those of his teammates.

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The second missile disaster occurred that same afternoon. Alerted by the Americans to the mysterious accident that had occured that morning during their own phase of the test, the Russians were watching for it. Their own missile was being fired from the submarine *Pravda,* in an empty stretch of ocean far to the northwest of Hawaii.

The second bird was fired from the *Pravda* at five minutes after three. Twenty-five seconds later, it began to veer sharply off course. The Russian scientists noted the same pattern that the Americans had, the change in direction, minute at first, then growing rapidly, and the same sense that the missile had a will of its own, simply choosing to ignore all of its control systems, despite the fact that those systems were functioning flawlessly. Like their American counterparts, the Russians tried desperately to abort the flight and were making plans to intercept the missile with another rocket when its flight came to an abrupt end, in a nuclear holocaust in the ocean, halfway between Hawaii and Japan.

From that moment on, by international agreement, testing of atomic weapons anywhere on the globe was suspended.

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So far, the test seemed to be an easy one, but in the Danger Room, appearances tended to be deceiving. Things really happened quickly, keeping the X-Men off balance. All of their attention was given to staying alive, to helping their teammates do the same, and to neutralizing, by whatever means necessary, all of the weapons and deadly devices that appeared so unexpectedly from out of the walls. Xavier was constantly refining the room's armaments, adding new traps, and giving the old ones new twists, so that the X-Men could never slip into carelessness or overconfidence.

Five minutes into the test, however, Nightcrawler was beginning to show signs of both. He seemed to be alert to every new threat that arose, evading machine-gun bullets with practiced ease and then leaping out of the way of a flamethrower that had suddenly been

activated on one wall. Just as his feet hit the floor, a trapdoor opened beneath them. Before Nightcrawler could fall through, he was suddenly . . . elsewhere. With a puff of brimstone-scented smoke and a sound like a small explosion, he teleported to the far side of the room, laughing.

Wolverine, alert for attack by a small force of tiny drone planes that had been harassing him, wrinkled his nose as the stench of sulphur from Nightcrawler's reappearance reached him, offending his animal-keen senses. "Cripes, don't distract me," he muttered, still watching for the planes. Almost before the next one appeared, he was upon it, ripping it into shards with his claws.

Banshee sailed through the air, held aloft by the sound waves of his wailing cry, which cut a path before him as he negotiated his way between the sharp spikes and pylons that sprang up in his way. He couldn't resist sneaking a peek at the rest of the X-Men to see how they were doing.

Fine, by the look of things, especially Storm. Rockets were being fired at her from all sides, and she maneuvered among them, riding the winds she created as casually as if she were out for a Sunday stroll. But then the girl was like that, always calm, almost never panicking. It was probably part of the image she'd learned to project when she'd been worshiped as the goddess of the weather. Of course, all those years in the wild had had a few undesirable side effects as well. There was one thing Ororo couldn't tolerate, Banshee knew, and one situation that he'd seen was likely to make her hysterical—Storm couldn't stand to be shut in. Simply put, she was claustrophobic. Poor lass . . . if she didn't set the better of that fear, soon, then someday it was likely to . . .

Too late. Banshee realized his mistake: he hadn't been paying enough attention. Now, a steel panel slammed shut in front of him. He was already too close to turn aside, and if he slammed into it at the speed he was flying . . . Desperately he tightened his vocal chords, and when there were only a few yards separating him from the barrier, he unleashed his most powerful scream, narrowing it into a tight beam of sonic energy that shattered the wall at the last second, enabling him to pass through it unharmed.

He didn't have much time to savor his victory, however. Looking around him, at Storm, shaken in her flight, and Wolverine, down on his knees, his hands over his ears, Banshee realized that the voice blast had taken its toll on his teammates—and on the room around them. Nightcrawler, his ears still ringing from the shriek, didn't hear the crack of machinery above him as a section of the spike-and-pylon device, damaged by the sound waves, started falling directly toward

his head.

"Saints alive, there's no way I can reach the lad in time," Banshee thought, streaking toward him. The others had already noticed the danger, Cyclops and Colossus going into action together. A force blast from Cyclops' eye beams destroyed most of the falling metal, and Colossus, darting forward, pulled Nightcrawler out of the path of the shrapnel, shielding his teammate with his own armored body as the fragments bounded harmlessly off his back and shoulders with a little "plinking" sound.

"Banshee, get down here!"

The test was over, and, from the sound of things, Cyclops was not too pleased with him. Silencing his scream, Banshee landed, philosophically preparing for the lecture. Sometimes Cyclops took himself, and his role as deputy leader of the team, too seriously.

"Just what in blazes did you think you were doing up there, having a picnic? You should have been ready for that panel, seen it shutting early enough so you wouldn't have had to resort to a blast like that!"

"Cyclops," Storm interposed, moderately, "there's no need . . ."

"There's *every* need. If Banshee ever pulled a stunt like that in a real battle, he could end up incapacitating his own teammates. That's what these Danger-Room sessions are all about, you know, honing our skills, teaching us teamwork, so we don't have to resort to boneheaded tricks like . . ."

"Mein Gott, Cyclops," Nightcrawler began, "Banshee didn't do it on purpose."

"Well, you didn't do much better," Cyclops retorted harshly, rounding on him. "If you'd seen that machinery falling, you could have simply teleported out of its way and saved Colossus and me the trouble of rescuing you. Your Danger-Room performance has been a little too showy lately as it is. You could be injured, or even killed if you continue to treat this place like your own private circus."

"Here, come on, what's the big deal?" Wolverine interrupted. "The elf did okay."

" 'Okay' is what's the big deal. That just isn't good enough; not when we all go out and risk our lives together, depending on how well we can use these powers of ours."

"And I say we're doing okay," the feisty little Canadian persisted. "I'm gettin' sick of you an' your 'leader of the team' routine."

"Well, you'd better get used to it, because that's the way it's always going to be, and if you don't like it, then you have no place with the X-Men."

"Back off, Bub." There was an audible *snick* as Wolverine extended

his claws, waving one hand under Cyclops' nose for added emphasis. "I know what's *really* bothering you. It's yourself, your own performance. You're always afraid you may hit someone with those eye beams of yours an' kill 'em, if they ever get out of control, and, Brother, it just might happen. Now, me . . . if I kill someone, it's gonna be 'cause I *want* to, 'cause he crossed me."

That will be quite enough, Wolverine.

If he was an X-Man until he died, Banshee doubted that he'd ever get used to the weird, disembodied voice echoing in his mind, in all their minds, although Xavier constantly used his telepathic powers to monitor the X-Men, to give them commands, and to refine their teamwork.

I am very pleased with your performance this afternoon, my X-Men. Particularly with yours, Colossus.

"Thank you, Professor." The Russian accepted the praise modestly, seemed to glow with pride from it.

This test is now over. You may return to your rooms and rest. Later, we'll discuss your performance and how it might be improved on, and I'll give you your grades.

"Terrific." Almost before the thought cast was completed, and the steel door of the Danger Room unlocked, Wolverine was tugging at his costume to remove it. "Right now a smoke and a couple o' beers would about do for me . . ."

There was a crackle, and the armor-plated Colossus converted back into the flesh and blood Peter Rasputin, falling into conversation with Banshee and Storm as the three of them left the room together. They completely blocked the door, and Nightcrawler, waiting behind them to get out, suddenly cast a mischievous look at Cyclops. "I'm sorry, my friend, but once a showman . . ." And with the characteristic "bamf," he vanished.

Cyclops, waiting in the room until his teammates had left, sighed and shook his head. Why hadn't it ever occurred to him before? As long as Nightcrawler could teleport through the walls when he found things getting too tough, the Danger Room would never be a real test for him. Cyclops didn't really think that Nightcrawler was likely to do anything cowardly; it was just that he was never sure what might happen when his teammate decided to show off. He wondered if the professor had ever thought about the problem. Probably. It was likely that if Nightcrawler ever did decide to pop outside of the room while a test was going on, he'd find some kind of little surprise waiting for him. The professor thought of things like that. Still, Cyclops reflected, pausing in the doorway, it wouldn't hurt to mention the idea to Xavier.

But not now. The test, and the reprimand he sensed in Xavier's thought-voice afterward had depressed him. He hoped that Xavier wasn't reading his mind just then. These were the kinds of thoughts he preferred to keep private.

Cyclops turned around for one last look at the room before he flicked off the lights. It was a shambles. There were cracks in the walls from Banshee's sonic blast, pylons and metal beams were pitted and charred from Storm's lightning bursts. The drone planes that had attacked Wolverine had been reduced to so much metal confetti, and he and Colossus, between them, had left even less of the machinery that had nearly killed Nightcrawler. Xavier would have to have about sixty percent of the room and its contents cleaned, repaired, and replaced before the X-Men could use it again. Cyclops allowed himself one small smile.

"How could any group that can do all that still need so much training?"

He closed the door behind him and walked down the corridor, past the Danger-Room control booth and the computer room where Cerebro was kept, then through a second doorway, into the more normal part of the house, the living quarters. He regarded that as one of Xavier's wisest decisions: to confine all of the scientific devices and testing materials to one wing of the house. When they had visitors at the school, they could maintain a façade of normalcy simply by locking that one door.

Cyclops liked the ordinary part of the house. It was, well . . . homey, and even a bit luxurious, in keeping with the mode for houses in the Salem Center area, like neither a classroom nor a training center. That was natural; the professor lived as well as worked here and so he made it his home. The rest of the X-Men might feel differently. Storm, for example, probably missed her beautiful jungle and Banshee his stone castle; Colossus would probably never consider any place home unless his parents were there. But Nightcrawler had lived most of his life in a traveling carnival, and Wolverine probably found the house a pleasant change from the government research center where Xavier had found him. For Cyclops, raised in an orphanage, this house was the one place he would ever think of as home.

Salem Center didn't have much to offer those in search of nightlife. The grocery store and most of the shops closed promptly at five, turning the business district into a virtual ghost town. There were only three exceptions, places that stayed open after the genteel, self-imposed curfew. One was a small movie theater that specialized in afternoon children's matinees and ran only the blandest of G- and PG-

rated films for the adult clientele, in the evenings. Occasionally the people of Salem Center got to see box-office hits at their theater, but these were the rare wholesome successes that came to town long after playing to the rest of the country.

The only other places open in the evening were a combination restaurant and ice-cream parlor, heavily geared toward family trade, and a bar. This last depended heavily on the local student population for its customers. Without them, it might long ago have faded into oblivion.

Wolverine, of course, opted for the bar. He'd left the mansion right after dinner, still feeling tense from that afternoon's Danger-Room test. He wasn't sure what he was in the mood for, but whatever it was, it couldn't be found in the house, or anywhere on its well-tended grounds. In fact, just getting away from the place for awhile might be enough. Coming upon the two limousines that belonged to the school —to the professor, really—parked in the driveway, Wolverine decided that the idea of a brief escape was extremely appealing. Without bothering with the formality of asking to use one of the cars or telling anyone else where he was going—not that he knew himself—Wolverine helped himself.

The nearest place to go, the only place in fact, was the town, and so, for lack of a clearer destination, he headed right for it. After parking the car and stepping out onto the sidewalk, he was distracted by a blast of noise coming from the bar. The door opened to admit two attractive young women. Convinced he'd come to the right place, Wolverine headed in that direction and followed them through the door.

It took his sharp eyes a moment to adjust when he stepped inside; his vision was blurred by the dim lighting and by cigarette smoke. Like everything else in town, the bar was on the small side. It wasn't full either, although there were around twenty people inside, most of them younger than he. The noise he'd heard came from various loud conversations, the clatter of glassware, and from music, of a sort, blaring forth from a jukebox in the corner. He couldn't distinguish any kind of a melody in it, just loud bass notes, an insistent drumbeat, and repetitive lyrics. The kids seemed to like it, although they found it difficult to understand one another over the din. Three or four of them, near the bar, added to the noise by playing a video game that beeped and buzzed as lights flashed across its screen.

Wolverine grinned and adjusted the Stetson he always wore when out of uniform. This wasn't really his kind of place, but it was a change, a change from the Danger Room, from Xavier always snooping with his mental powers, from the garden-party atmosphere

of the rest of Salem Center. He sauntered up to the bar, took an empty stool next to two encouragingly pretty girls, lit up a cigarette, and ordered a beer. While he was waiting, he shifted around a little to get a better look at the girls and to try to join their conversation.

". . . wasn't so much the bad grade I minded," an earnest-looking blonde was saying, "even though I know it's going to wreck my average. It was the way he spoke to me. He was so . . . so condescending, like he was some kind of high and mighty god, and I was just dirt under his feet."

Her friend, a pretty, though somewhat overweight brunette, agreed. "A lot of the teachers get like that. They go on some sort of power trip when you put a grade book in their hands. They suddenly think they know more than us mere mortals, still struggling along trying to learn."

"Well, I don't care how much smarter than me he is, I don't like being talked down to. And my term paper was okay, no matter what he said. That old . . . creep!" the blonde burst out, after groping for a severe enough description.

"Hey, Doll," Wolverine admonished her, sipping his beer, "you're makin' your real mistake when you believe a teacher's line. You probably are a lot smarter than he is. Like you said, all he's got goin' for him is a grade book and a nasty tongue."

Both girls turned to look at him. "Sometimes I think so," the brunette agreed. "Hi. I'm Cathy, and this is Janet."

"Name's Logan," Wolverine replied, stubbing out his first cigarette.

"Do you go to school around here, too?" Janet asked him, eyes narrowed as she tried to estimate his age.

"Yep."

"Isn't it just awful sometimes?" Cathy exclaimed. "They say you need a degree to get ahead in life, but sometimes I wonder . . ." Nodding agreement, Wolverine noticed that one of the young men who'd been playing the video game was wandering in their direction. "You work so hard, and they treat you so awful, and what's it all for? What thanks do you get?"

"Yeah, it's really the pits," the young man agreed, settling down next to Cathy. "Hey, kids, who's your friend?"

"Oh, hi, Greg," Cathy greeted him. "This is Logan. He goes to school around here, too. We were just talking about what creeps teachers can be sometimes."

Wolverine, pausing to light a cigarette, looked coolly at the newcomer. Somehow, this clean-cut, supercilious kid reminded him of Scott Summers. "Yeah, most o' the profs are jerks, an' of course, you

always get the teacher's pet . . .” He scowled, remembering that afternoon's training session. “Man, in my class, we got this one guy . . . No matter what you do, it ain't good enough, an' then he starts riding me, like he an' the professor are better than I am, smarter . . . Sometimes, I get so I'd just like to take 'em both on . . .”

“ 'Take them both on'?” Greg repeated, amused. “What course are you talking about, anyway?”

Wolverine hesitated. What could he say about the Danger Room? Survival training? No, that sounded too military. “Uh . . . phys. ed.,” he replied finally.

“Gym class?” Cathy repeated. “That sounds awful. Ooh, Janet, if we went to a school that had mandatory gym classes, I think I'd just die.”

“It does sound awful,” Janet agreed. “Why do you go to a school like that?”

“Oh, all that physical fitness stuff is a big part o' the curriculum at this school,” Wolverine assured her, beginning to enjoy the importance his story was giving him. “Not just anybody can go to this place, either. You've gotta be special . . . tough an' smart both.”

“Hey, just where do you go to school, anyway?” Greg asked, intrigued.

Wolverine turned back to his beer and muttered something unintelligible.

“What?”

Wolverine mumbled again, a little louder.

“Hey, come on, Logan, speak up. You can't give the place a big buildup like that and then just leave us in suspense.”

“Xavier's School for . . . Gifted Youngsters,” Wolverine answered reluctantly. “I go to Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters.”

Greg had no way of knowing that what he did next was the worst thing he could possibly have done.

He laughed at Wolverine.

Banshee, puffing on a clay pipe, sighed contentedly. Evening at the mansion was the best time of day, the time he looked forward to when the X-Men weren't out on a mission. Classes were over, the professor usually retired to his study, and the mood was pleasant and leisurely —especially after some of their housekeeper's excellent cooking.

“Sean, me boy,” he said to himself peacefully, “it's lucky ye are to be leadin' the kind o' active life that lets a man enjoy his food an' not be gainin' weight.”

The house was comfortable, too—and quiet, since Wolverine had

slipped off somewhere without trying to start any trouble. Colossus and Nightcrawler were sitting at a table before the fireplace, heads bent over a board game. Storm stood nearby, watching them.

"Aha!" Nightcrawler exclaimed triumphantly, as he made his move, "I have you, my friend! I get points for 'verbosity' and a double-word score for 'bureaucrat'!"

Colossus groaned good-naturedly. "Kurt, this is not fair! You know more words than I do. English is not my native language."

"Nor mine," Nightcrawler reminded him cheerily. "It's your turn."

"Don't feel bad, Peter," Storm comforted him. "Kurt has the advantage of knowing the alphabet. And," she added, smiling at her eerie-looking teammate, "I think he would get points for verbosity in any language he spoke. Excuse me, now," she added, turning away. "I'm going upstairs to water my plants. They must be thirsty."

"Vas . . . ?" Nightcrawler muttered blankly, looking after her.

"What she was tryin' to say, Lad," Banshee explained kindly, "is that ye got a gift for blarney."

"Would you like to join us, Sean?" asked Colossus, looking up from the board.

"No, thanks. I'm more in the mood for a game o' chess. I think I'll go see what the professor's up to."

Still puffing on his pipe, Banshee wandered out of the room and down the hall. There was no sign of Xavier anywhere and no answer when Banshee tapped lightly on the door of his study. "Charles? Are ye in here? I was wondering if ye might enjoy a game o' chess." The unlatched door swung slowly open into the empty room. Sean shook his head, then decided to try the wing of the house where they kept the equipment.

When he got there, the main door was already unlocked, and the lights were on. Xavier was sitting in his wheelchair behind Cerebro's main console. His eyes, intent on the world map before him, were watching the telltale blink of lights across its surface, indicators of mutant activity across the globe.

"Evenin', Charles."

"Good evening," Xavier replied perfunctorily, still intent on the computer.

"What're ye workin' on there? It looks important."

"It may be important—very important." Xavier looked at Sean now, his expression still distracted. "Banshee, I really haven't got time to talk to you," Xavier told him. "I suggest you go try Scott. He's in need of company." He went back to his work without even waiting for Banshee's reply.

Philosophically dismissing the notion of a chess game, Banshee made his way out of the mutant-research wing, up to the second floor of the house. He could hear the sound of thunder, although the night outside was clear and cloudless. Storm, in her attic room, must be watering her indoor forest plants.

The door to Cyclops' room was shut. Banshee knocked on it and received no answer. Remembering Xavier's advice, he turned the doorknob and went in anyway. Cyclops was sitting in an armchair, leaning one elbow on the armrest and his chin on his hand, staring moodily into space. Like the rest of the X-Men, he'd changed into civilian clothes, and in place of his visor, he was wearing sunglasses, their ruby-quartz lenses containing his deadly eye beams.

Banshee walked into the room and sat on the edge of the bed, next to Scott's chair.

"What is it, Sean?"

"Nothin' too serious, lad," Banshee assured him, puffing on his pipe. "I just thought ye might like a little company. Ye disappeared very quickly after dinner."

"Maybe I just want to be alone."

"Maybe," Banshee conceded, "but I doubt it. The X-Men are supposed to be a team, Scott. That's what ye're always tryin' to drum into us, but teamwork doesn't end at the door o' the Danger Room. If we're gonna stick together, it's got to be all the time, and not just when ye decide it suits ye. Maybe talkin' about what's botherin' ye might help ease your mind."

"Sean . . ." Scott looked at him, prepared to say "thanks, anyway," but he hesitated, and smiled in spite of himself.

Banshee grinned, looking suddenly like a leprechaun. "Come on, Scott. I doubt yer problem's as bad as all that."

Cyclops sighed, frowning again. "I guess I'm overreacting. It's myself I'm bothered by. Myself, and what happened in the Danger Room."

"Don't let it worry ye so much . . ." Banshee began, but Cyclops silenced him with a wave of the hand.

"It's just that . . . the professor reprimanded Wolverine, but I got the feeling it was me he was really disappointed in. I let him down, Banshee. I'm supposed to be helping all of you, setting a good example. Instead, I let Wolverine get to me, started wrangling with him like we were a couple of kids. The professor may not have said anything, but the reproach was there, all the same."

"Scott, maybe I'm the wrong one to be advisin' anyone," Banshee told him. "I'm not a priest or a psychiatrist, an' I'm certainly not

Charles, but I do know this: ye're not helpin' anyone by being too rough on yourself. If ye get too far out o' line, ye know ye'll hear about it. Till then, why don't ye just forget it?"

"Maybe you're right . . ." Scott said.

"Of course I'm right," Sean assured him. It was beginning to look as if he might get his chess game after all. "Now why don't ye come downstairs an' join the rest of us? Leave yer frowns up here for the night."

Attention, X-Men!

Xavier's mental summons cut off Cyclops' reply.

All of you come to the testing wing of the mansion at once. We have urgent business to discuss.

Scott rose, smiling. "Maybe tomorrow night, Sean."

"Aye," Banshee sighed, doing likewise. Both walked toward the door of the room, but before they went through it, there was a "bamfing" sound, and Nightcrawler appeared in a sulfurous cloud.

"Scott, where is Wolverine," he asked, not bothering to apologize for the abrupt entrance.

"I don't know, but wherever he is, you can talk to him at the professor's meeting."

"I hope you're sure of that," Nightcrawler replied, uneasily. "Listen. Peter and I were playing Scrabble, and he wanted Wolverine to join us. We've looked all over the house. He's not here."

"What do you mean, 'not here'?" Cyclops demanded.

"One of the cars is gone," Kurt explained unhappily.

"Oh, that's just great!"

"When Herr Professor finds out . . ." Nightcrawler muttered.

"He isn't going to find out," Cyclops interrupted him grimly. "Come on, Banshee. There's still another car."

"You mean we're going after him?" asked Nightcrawler.

"Not 'we.' Just Sean and I. If Wolverine's gone into town, we'll have to follow him and bring him back as unobtrusively as possible. The last thing we need is to have someone get a look at you and start asking questions. Just go down to the meeting and act as if you don't know a thing."

"But, Scott, if Herr Professor asks me . . ."

"He won't. Come on, Banshee."

"Good luck." Almost before the words had left his mouth, Nightcrawler vanished in another puff of brimstone.

When they were in the car and on their way, Banshee ventured to ask the question that had been bothering him. "Cyclops . . . what if

the lad ain't in Salem Center? What if he's gone for good. He may have just had enough . . . up an' left us."

"No, he'll be there," Cyclops assured him. "Auto theft isn't Wolverine's style, and neither is sneaking away without a word to anyone. I think he just borrowed the car, intending to bring it back after he'd cooled off a little."

"But what if he ain't here?" Banshee persisted, as the car drove into town.

"Where else could he go?" Scott almost smiled. "Besides," he added, pointing ahead of him, "look." They were drawing near to the bar, now, and from all indications there was a fight going on inside. A chair came flying out one window, shattering the glass. A moment later, the door flew open, and three girls ran out through it, screaming.

"Oh, no," Banshee breathed, staring at the scene of destruction as Cyclops parked the car. "The little maniac . . . he wouldn't . . ."

"Of course he would. I just hope he had the sense not to use his claws.

"Come on," Cyclops added, getting out of the car. "Let's get him out of there before the police arrive."

It was difficult for them to enter the bar, since most of the clientele was trying to get out of the door. As they came in, a full stein of beer whizzed through the air between them, smashing with a splatter on the wall. In the center of the room was Wolverine, claws still safely retracted, trading kicks and blows with several students, all of them taller and broader than he was.

" 'At a boy, ye're doin' fine," Banshee cheered him.

"Not you, too," Cyclops objected, starting forward. "Come on, we have to . . ."

"Look out, laddie!" Sean exclaimed, ignoring Scott. One of the students had picked up a chair and was moving up behind Wolverine. With a whoop, Banshee launched himself across the floor, tackling the student. His momentum threw them both against a table and brought it crashing to the floor.

"Way to go, Irish!" Wolverine congratulated his teammate, then turned his attention back to the fracas.

Cyclops, seeing that he now had two problems to contend with instead of just one, started forward, intending to break up the fight. "Listen, Logan, the professor just called an urgent meeting . . ." Banshee's opponent, reeling backward, staggered against Scott, knocking him against the bar. As he stumbled, his glasses slipped off his nose, into the wreckage at his feet. "My glasses!" he exclaimed,

closing his eyes at once. “Sean! Logan! I’ve lost my glasses. You’ve got to help me find them!” He dropped onto the floor and began groping blindly forward. Wolverine, seeing his team leader down on hands and knees took advantage of the situation, sending a student staggering backward to trip over Scott.

Afraid that at any second the crimson force rays might come exploding past his closed lids, Cyclops clapped both hands over his eyes and stumbled for the door. As he made his way out into the night air, he heard a hoot of derisive laughter from Wolverine.

“Come on, now,” Banshee admonished the Canadian. “That’s the lot of ’em.” He walked over to the fireplace and scooped up Cyclops’ glasses. In the distance now they could hear sirens wailing. He bolted for the door; Wolverine, who stopped long enough to snatch up his discarded Stetson, followed in his wake.

They found Scott just outside the door, his hands still over his eyes. “Here ye are,” Sean patted him on the shoulder and handed him his glasses. “We found ’em for ye.”

“ ‘My glasses! Oh, Sean, Logan, I’ve lost my glasses,’ ” Wolverine mocked, as Scott slipped them on. “Move it, you two,” he added, heading for his car. “The heat’s gonna be here any second.” Banshee, after one look at Cyclops’ face, wisely elected to ride with Wolverine.

Wolverine’s spirits seemed to have been raised considerably by the brawl. He didn’t speak much on the way home, but he drummed his fingers against the steering wheel, humming the jukebox tune he’d found so annoying earlier.

“Ye’re feelin’ mighty pleased with yerself, aren’t ye?” Banshee remarked.

“Sure. Why not? I did okay. You didn’t do half bad either, now that I think of it. It was worth the whole hassle just to see Mr. High-an’-mighty Summers go running out o’ there like a pansy, with his hands over his eyes.” Wolverine glanced at the reflection in the rearview mirror, of the second limousine following them.

“Now ye ain’t bein’ fair,” Banshee objected. “The professor called a meeting over a half hour ago, an Scott came to get you, without a word to anyone. He’s goin’ to be in trouble when he gets back.”

“Yeah,” Wolverine agreed. “For about thirty seconds. Till he tells ol’ Skinhead it was my fault, as usual.” He settled back into silence, refusing to speak again. When they reached the school, he pulled the car into the circular driveway, parking directly in front of the door. As he and Banshee were getting out, the second car pulled up, stopping at a speed that scattered gravel in every direction.

Cyclops got out without speaking to either one and preceded them into the house. Rushing to keep up, Banshee and Wolverine followed

him. They maintained a swift pace as they went through the main hallway and across the normal section of the house. It was only after they got into the wing where the equipment and hardware were kept that Scott slowed down, walking gingerly, trying to make as little noise as possible. The others followed his example.

When the latecomers slipped into the computer room, Colossus, Nightcrawler, and Storm were already in their seats, listening to Xavier lecture. He interrupted himself as he noted their arrival.

"I called you here at ten o'clock. You three are late."

Cyclops, caught in the act of trying to sneak into an empty seat, stopped and looked up. "Yes, sir."

"You've already missed my analysis of this afternoon's test, as well as your grades. Is there any explanation?"

Wolverine braced himself to receive the blame, then gaped as Cyclops replied, "I'm afraid not, sir."

"Banshee . . . Wolverine?" Both of them muttered something noncommittal. "Well, since it doesn't seem to have meant much to any of you, I'm sure you won't mind that I'm changing all three of your grades to 'F.' "

Still staring at Cyclops, unable to fathom what their teammate's motive had been in shielding Wolverine, all of the X-Men missed seeing the pleased smile that belied Xavier's harsh words.

"We have a grave problem to consider," he continued. "Something happened today that makes me suspect that the safety of this entire planet may be in dire jeopardy. Indeed, unless we act quickly, nuclear war may result." He paused to let his last words sink in.

"What is it, Professor?" Colossus asked. "What has happened?"

"Today, a multinational missile test was scheduled," Xavier replied gravely. "The first part was held this morning, at a test site in the southwestern United States. The rocket they launched bore a nuclear warhead, and it was guided by the most sophisticated control and safety systems ever devised. Yet, in full view of over thirty witnesses, that missile deviated radically from its intended course, veering to a spot over twenty miles away before spontaneously crashing and exploding. And throughout the test, despite the missile's failure to respond to them, the control devices and abort mechanism were operating perfectly."

"Sabotage, Herr Professor," Nightcrawler told him promptly.

"Yes, Kurt, that's what the authorities were afraid of, and so they warned the Russians before the second test. As a result, their missile was checked scrupulously, immediately before it was fired from a submarine in the Pacific Ocean. They found it and all of its controls to

be in perfect working order. However, it, too, failed to respond to its controls once it was in the air. It turned off course and exploded a hundred miles off the coast of Japan. The Japanese government, understandably, is in an uproar."

"But, who would have access to both an American missile and a Russian submarine?" Nightcrawler faltered. "Two saboteurs . . . ?"

"Assuming that the access existed," Xavier prodded him gently, "who would have the motive for such an act?"

"Someone who wants war," Cyclops suggested.

"That is precisely what the authorities are concerned about," Xavier agreed. "In order to prevent any further disasters, all use and testing of atomic weapons has been suspended, around the globe, by international agreement, pending further discussion."

"I don't get it!" Nightcrawler exclaimed. "None of us wants war, of course, but why do you say this is a problem for the X-Men?"

"Hey, come on, now," Wolverine drawled. "We wear the white hats, remember? Fighting for peace, truth, an' justice wherever we go."

"I think the problem is a little closer to home than you realize," Storm chided him. "Think. We're talking about atomic warfare. That will mean fallout. And the increased radiation may mean an increase in the number of mutants and harmful mutations."

"Very good, Ororo," the professor remarked. "But I'm interested in the problem because it may concern us even more directly than that.

"All this afternoon and evening, experts have debated about what could have caused malfunctions in both missiles, if they rule out the unlikely possibility that both were tampered with. The most likely cause of trouble would be a radio signal strong enough to override the guidance systems, but so far there's been nothing to indicate the existence of such a signal. The second possibility is that a magnetic disturbance affected the missiles' performance. Magnometers in the regions detected some irregularity in the earth's magnetic field during this morning's test."

"What would cause a change like that, Professor?" asked Cyclops.

"There are always minute diurnal fluctuations in the field's intensity and in the locations of the north and south magnetic poles. Of course, such variations, by themselves, wouldn't be enough to significantly alter the course of one missile, let alone two.

"Sun spots generally have a dramatic effect on all forms of terrestrial radiation and energy, particularly magnetism," Xavier continued, "but observatories haven't recorded any unusual sun-spot activity in days.

"And so this evening, armed with what I'd learned from the

authorities, I came down here and activated Cerebro. The computer picked up a new reading . . . here." As Xavier spoke, he moved his wheelchair toward the console and flipped a button. One of the lights on the world map, up in the Arctic Circle, flickered on, very faintly.

"The signal is so weak," Storm murmured, frowning. "All of us register much more strongly than that. So do all of your old students."

"I'm not even certain that this signal and the missile accidents are related," Xavier admitted. "But we may be dealing with a new mutant, or with a latent mutant whose powers are becoming manifest. It's possible that whoever it is doesn't realize he or she has been affecting missile shots."

"What is up there, anyway?" asked Colossus.

"Very little . . . It's not really a land mass at all. Just a tremendous ice floe that's frozen together for the autumn and winter. All you'll find up there at this time of year, besides the rare animals and native hunters, are teams of meteorological researchers, working at weather stations that drift along atop the ice."

"Ice floes an' Eskimos, huh?" Wolverine scoffed. "Is that what you figure we got here, a mutant eskimo? Want us to go get him and ask him to join up? That'd really make this team international."

"That is for you to find out," Xavier told him, clicking off the computer, "as soon as you're all in uniform. Our private plane is already fueled and waiting.

"Good luck, my X-Men!"

The shadow of the X-Men's sleek modern plane, following them on the surface of the ice beneath, dipped sharply into a crevasse and then popped back up onto the surface. It was about ten the next morning. Except for one brief refueling stop, the X-Men had been in flight since the end of their meeting with Xavier. Cyclops, as always, was piloting the plane. Wolverine, looking out the window, shielded his eyes against the glare of the sun on snow and remarked, "Boy! That's bright! You know. Bub, I've never envied you havin' to wear that visor, but right now, with you flyin' this crate, I'm real glad you got it on."

"That's nice of you, Wolverine," Cyclops observed sarcastically, as he checked his instruments.

"That sure is a lot of nothin' out there," Wolverine continued. "I thought I'd be glad to see Canada again after being away all these months, but this is one part of it the government can keep!"

"Oh, do not say that," Colossus objected. "It is . . . very beautiful."

"Now, don't go tellin' us it reminds ye of dear old Siberia," Banshee

warned him. “We all know ye’re from a different part o’ Russia.”

“Yes, but once, when I was a child, my family rode the Trans-Siberian Railway . . . It was very . . . I did not know that from the air, a sight like this could be so . . .” Peter stammered, unable to find the English words to describe the way the icy wastes moved him.

“Magnificent?” Nightcrawler suggested. “Yes, and cold! Cyclops, where are we?”

“We passed the Boothia Peninsula about five minutes ago. Now were getting close to the north magnetic pole.”

“Look there!” Colossus exclaimed, pointing out a window at a small encampment of tin huts. It was far behind them almost before his companions had spotted it. “It is one of Professor Xavier’s weather stations.”

“Speakin’ o’ weather,’ Banshee remarked, “Ororo’s been awfully silent for the last hour or so. What’s with you, lass?” He turned to look at her, sitting by a window, her eyes dark and faraway.

“Don’t break her concentration,” Cyclops advised. “She’s been controlling the weather around the plane, directing blizzards and ice storms away from us so it’s safe to fly. In fact, if we didn’t have her along, there’d be no point in coming this far north. It’s way below zero down there, and there are high winds. I don’t know about Kurt and Peter—neither of them has what you’d call normal skin—but without special cold-weather gear, you, I, and Wolverine would freeze to death in a matter of minutes. Storm can prevent that by raising the temperature just high enough for us to survive without the risk of starting to thaw things out around us.”

Impressed, all of her teammates turned to look at Storm. She still had that same distant look in her eye, as though she were communicating with something outside of the plane, but she acknowledged that she’d heard the praise by smiling.

“It’s good to have people smoothing the way for us,” Colossus declared. “Storm up here in the skies, and Professor Xavier down on the ground, making everything good with the authorities.”

“Sometimes I wonder just how he goes about ‘making everything good’ for us,” Nightcrawler chuckled.

“I don’t know what you mean . . .”

“Think about it, Peter. Anytime he needs information about something highly classified, anytime he wants to send us anywhere, he always seems to get security clearance for it.”

“Kurt!” The Russian was shocked. “You aren’t accusing the professor of controlling the minds of the authorities?”

“Well . . . I didn’t mean that . . . it just occurred to me that

sometimes he might make . . . suggestions to them . . . with his mind," Nightcrawler stammered lamely. "What's wrong with that, if he does?"

He never got to hear the reply, for, at that second, the plane gave a tremendous lurch. All of the X-Men pitched violently forward against their safety belts as Cyclops wrestled with the controls.

"What's happenin'?" Banshee yelled.

"I don't know," Cyclops replied through clenched teeth. "It's as if something down on the ice has seized the plane and is pulling it down. I can't make it respond to the controls. Storm, can you stop us?"

Before he'd completed the question, Storm was out of her seat, making sweeping gestures with her hands. Then she shook her head. "I'm sorry, Scott, but whatever power has us is stronger than I am. I've summoned up a wind to slow our descent, but that's all I can do."

"Good work," Cyclops congratulated her. "Come on, now, everyone! Let's do this the way we practiced it." He, Wolverine, and Banshee turned toward the sides of the plane, ripping holes in the fuselage with force beam, claw, and sonic waves. Colossus was beside them and helping in the few moments it took him to convert from flesh to armor, punching holes with his bare hands. When the openings were large enough, all four scrambled out of the body of the plane, onto the wings.

Nightcrawler, seeing that his teammates were safely outside, teleported to join them, and Storm flew after. She extended one hand to Wolverine and the other to Nightcrawler and lifted them off the wing. Banshee, a less powerful flier, grabbed Cyclops with both hands and did likewise. Colossus simply jumped, smashing into the snowy surface at roughly the same time that their plane, which had plummeted swiftly once Storm stopped supporting it, crashed and exploded several hundred yards away.

Colossus' powerful body was uninjured by the impact of his fall. Unfortunately, the ice he struck, without the support of land underneath, was not. A gaping crack, filled with water, opened beneath Peter, but before his heavy metal form could sink, Storm and Banshee, who'd already put the rest of the team safely on the ground, flew to the rescue. Their combined strength was enough to raise him onto solid ice.

"Gott in himmel," Nightcrawler murmured, the expression in his glowing eyes one of awe as he surveyed the walls of ice that rose a hundred feet on either side of them, "where are we?"

"Inside a crevasse," Cyclops explained. "But I'm more interested in why we're here. What made us crash like that?"

“Over here, Bub,” Wolverine called. “I think I found something.”

He was pointing to a metal structure near one icy wall: a smooth, unmarked dome, perhaps fifty feet in diameter. “What’s that thing? And what’s it doin’ down here?”

Banshee and Storm flew up, with Colossus following on the ground. When the whole team was together, they approached the dome and began walking around it, seeking an entrance. Storm and Banshee examined it from the air.

“Do you think this is what made us crash?” asked the Russian.

“Ye got me,” Banshee replied, landing. “Scott, do ye think it could be what we came up here to find?”

“There’s only one way to tell,” Cyclops answered grimly, pressing the control stud at his temple and activating his visor. The protective red panel began to move upward. When it was open, the force rays from Cyclops’ eyes flashed outward to strike at the gleaming surface of the dome. The beam coruscated around the building without doing any appreciable damage. “I don’t understand it,” Cyclops said. “The beam’s not doing a thing . . . It’s as if it weren’t quite touching the metal.”

“I will touch the metal,” Colossus told him. “I will open the dome. Save your eye beams for whatever you find inside.” Stepping forward, he punched the metallic surface. The sound of impact rang and resounded off the walls of the miniature ice valleys, as Colossus struck again and again.

“Hey, Kurt,” Banshee muttered, “why don’t ye save us all some time an’ grief, an’ just teleport inside that thing?”

“That is a good question,” the German conceded. “Now I have one for you. What happens to me if I materialize inside that thing, and it’s made of solid metal?”

Banshee didn’t answer at once. “I sure hope Peter isn’t gettin’ tired . . .”

The place where his fists had struck repeatedly was finally beginning to buckle and crack when the same force that had seized the plane took hold of Colossus. One moment, he was maintaining his determined assault on the dome. The next, he went flying rapidly toward the wall of the crevasse, his expression one of complete surprise.

Gaping after him, none of the X-Men saw the minute seams appear, parting the surface of the dome, their edges rolling back to create a large opening.

Colossus struck the ice wall at high speed, becoming partially embedded in it. “Peter, are you all right?” asked Nightcrawler

anxiously.

"Oh. I hope not," came a voice from behind them. "Dealing with you has been such a nuisance already, I don't want to have to start repeating myself."

The X-Men turned back toward the dome. "Cyclops," Storm breathed, "there was no sign of any opening before. Where did the doorway come from?"

"I don't know, Ororo," Cyclops admitted, then raised his voice. "Whoever you are, come out here where we can see you."

" 'Whoever you are?' " the voice mocked. "I thought surely when you arrived here that you must have guessed my true identity."

Colossus, still covered with snow and a trifle dazed, whispered in Cyclops' ear, "Let me go in there. I will make him come out."

Scott nodded cautiously, watching as the Russian advanced on the dome. When he was only a few yards away from it, the invisible power took hold of him again, whipping his steel body through the air in a dizzying series of loops and turns. This time Cyclops was ready for it. "Flesh and blood, Colossus!" he yelled. "Turn back to flesh and blood!"

Colossus obeyed, making the transformation to his more vulnerable state. Instantly the force lost its hold on him, and he began to plunge toward the ice. Banshee, wailing, caught him in midair before he struck.

"Excellent, Cyclops," the voice from the dome mocked him. "You have guessed who I am."

"Come out of there, Magneto," Cyclops ordered again.

"Oh, very well," the voice agreed, in a tone that indicated that their mysterious foe was going to obey Cyclops only because it suited him. Slowly, majestically, he strode forth from his shelter. Magneto was a mature man, older even than Xavier, but he was tall and powerfully built. He wore a red-and-purple costume, with a helmet that hid most of his face and made his voice ring hollowly when he spoke. His cape, flaring and fluttering in the Arctic winds, cast a dramatic shadow before him. "How did you find me?" he asked at last. "I've only used my powers in the subtlest fashion, hoping no one would suspect."

"Actually, we didn't know it was you," Cyclops admitted, watching Nightcrawler out of the corner of one eye. Unseen by Magneto, the German sidled around behind him, edged over to the dome, and vanished. "We merely came looking for the source of the missile disasters."

"For trouble, you mean," Magneto corrected him, "Let me assure you that you are going to find it, unless you swear allegiance to me,

here and now."

"To you?" Wolverine repeated scornfully.

"Yes, to me! To Magneto, Master of Magnetism and the rightful leader of this planet's mutant population. The days of mere humans are drawing to a close! We are the wave of the future! Join me!" he exhorted them.

"That's a pretty speech," said Banshee.

"Yeah, Bub," Wolverine agreed. "Blow it out your ear."

Magneto's face, shadowed by his helmet, darkened with rage, but before he could reply, Nightcrawler's voice was heard from within the dome.

"Cyclops! *Mein Gott,* Cyclops!" he exclaimed in a panic. Then he reappeared beside his leader and continued, "We have to stop him. At once! You cannot believe what he has in there."

"Oh," Magneto laughed, as he gestured behind him. "You mean this?"

Slowly, ominously, it crept out of the dome, tilting until it stood upright in the snow, a gleaming metal cylinder, nearly forty feet long. There was silence for several minutes.

Then Cyclops whispered, "The third missile."

"Precisely. By now the Chinese must regret having gone ahead with their test. I doubt they have any notion of what became of their rocket. I didn't know if I could bring one down unexploded until I tried it. Now that I can, this rocket will just be the start of my collection."

"But why are you doing this? What do you want?" Cyclops demanded.

Magneto shrugged. "What does any man want? Power, world conquest . . . I intend to step in and take over after I've set all the major nations at each other's throats. In the meantime. I'll remain isolated with this shelter to protect me from fallout and . . . other unpleasant consequences."

"Fat chance!" Wolverine scoffed, extending his claws and launching himself at Magneto in one swift motion. Before any of the other X-Men could react, Magneto had caught him.

Unbelievably, Wolverine found himself hanging in the air, several feet off the ground, supported only by the magnetic hold on his claws and metal skeleton.

"I remember you now," Magneto remarked. "The homicidal maniac. What shall I do with him, now that I've caught him?" Magneto addressed the other X-Men, who'd started to rush forward. A signal from Cyclops checked them all, afraid to act while their teammate was

hostage. “Perhaps I’ll fling you against the valley wall, as I did your companion, or let you drop through a hole in the ice.

“Or,” he added, more harshly, “I could simply rip the living skeleton out of your body.” Wolverine dangled, quiet and tense, waiting for Magneto to make his move.

With a swift, sudden motion, the mutant villain flung Wolverine, claws first, directly at Peter Rasputin. Colossus changed at once back into his metallic form, so that the Canadian struck him with a resounding clang that did little harm to either one.

“Everyone hit him at once!” Cyclops yelled immediately. “Keep him off balance! Don’t let him concentrate!”

The rest of the X-Men obeyed, Banshee and Storm taking to the air and launching a dual assault of energy blasts, sound, and lightning, at their opponent. Scott opened his visor and concentrated his optic beams on Magneto, but somehow, none of their power seemed to be reaching the older mutant. He stood, laughing and unhurt, at the very eye of their attack.

“Scott, what’s wrong?” asked Storm. “Why aren’t our energy blasts reaching him?”

“He’s set up a magnetic field around himself,” Cyclops shouted. “It’s acting as a damper against all other forms of energy. That must be how he kept my eye beams away from the dome.”

“What can we do about it?”

“Just what we’ve been doing. Keep hammering away. He can’t maintain the shield forever.”

“No,” Magneto agreed, “but I’ll wager that my shield will outlast your pitiful assault.” As if to emphasize his last statement, the empty space around him suddenly expanded, driving their three-pronged attack farther back. He’d expanded his protective field.

“The more of us making the assault, the worse your chances of outlasting it,” Colossus announced, rising from where he and Wolverine had fallen into the snow.

“Peter, stay back,” Nightcrawler implored him. “Magneto may seize hold of you again, and, in his hands, your body would become a powerful weapon against the rest of us!” So far, he himself had hovered uneasily about the perimeter of the fight, aware that he was out of his class in power and watching for a chance to help the other X-Men.

“Do not worry, friend Kurt,” the Russian replied. “I will not make the mistake of approaching Magneto again.” He picked up some of the wreckage that had been thrown clear when their plane exploded. Using all of the strength in his powerful frame. Colossus threw heavy

sections of the rubble at Magneto, over forty feet away.

The wreckage shattered against the protective field, but the mutant villain appeared to be slightly staggered by the effort of maintaining his defense against such an impact.

"Everyone watch out for shrapnel!" Cyclops warned. "Good work, Colossus! Keep it up! I think we're getting to him!"

Nightcrawler had watched his companions long enough to gauge how far the magnetic field extended. He teleported inside of it, right next to Magneto and hit his enemy with both fists. Before Magneto could strike back, he'd teleported back outside of the field.

"You fork-tailed annoyance!" Magneto yelled. "You . . . coward! Traitor to Homo superior . . . !"

"Cyclops," Storm whispered urgently, hovering near her team leader, "his field is weakening. Look!"

Following her gaze, Cyclops realized that she was right. A portion of the invisible barrier was rippling inward, buckling under their assault.

"Good!" Cyclops replied. "That's where we'll concentrate our fire. Banshee! Colossus! Aim for his weak spot—where the field is thinnest!"

They followed his orders. Magneto frowned with the effort of concentration as he tried to fortify his field against the siege. "Fools!" he shouted. "We should be working together, not fighting each other! What has humanity ever offered any of us but fear and torment, and the lot of the outcast? Why do you side with their ignorance and prejudice, against me? My order will be *our* order, the rule of the mutants. I offer you freedom and power."

"Strange words when spoken together," Storm observed. "We are not fooled, Magneto. The only power you are interested in is your own, and the only freedom other mutants will find under your tyranny is the freedom to obey your will. We reject your offer!"

"It's hard to consider an offer of peace seriously when it's made under the shadow of a nuclear weapon," Nightcrawler agreed. Once more he teleported inside the invisible shield and struck Magneto. The villain glared at him, more outraged than hurt. Then, unexpectedly, he dropped his magnetic field. Nightcrawler was standing between him and the rest of the X-Men, momentarily preventing his own teammates from striking.

Magneto used his power to snatch up a piece of discarded metal from Colossus' attack, and brandished it at Kurt, who barely teleported away in time. Then he flung it at Banshee, before the Irish mutant could renew his sonic assault.

Banshee wheeled upward, flying out of range of the metal, but,

upheld by Magneto, it only followed him at a faster pace. When he saw that it was about to strike him. Banshee turned on it, altering the pitch of his scream and shattering the metal into fragments.

The cliffs, shaken by the sonic blast, began to crumble a little at the top.

"Look out, Irish!" Wolverine yelled, still unable to take an active hand in the battle. "You sing too loud, and you may bring the walls down."

Storm, hearing the warning, abandoned her attack for the moment. She flew up toward the tops of the cliffs and summoned rain down from the skies, casting it onto the area damaged by the sonic blast. In a matter of seconds, the intense Arctic cold had frozen the water, sealing the cracks and repairing the damage.

Meanwhile, down on the snow. Nightcrawler was being pursued by a swarm of what appeared to be small metal bees. Magneto, safe once more behind his shield, had seized the shrapnel created by Banshee's blast and was directing it at the German. Almost as fast as he could teleport from place to place, the swarm was following him.

"Where is your bravado now?" Magneto gloated. "Your boasts and your insults? You'll find it hard to launch another sneak attack on me while you're running for your life."

"Cyclops!" Colossus exclaimed, horrified, "Kurt is nearly exhausted. The teleportation power cannot be used indefinitely."

"I know, Peter," Cyclops replied, "but . . ."

Before he finished his answer, the problem was solved. Storm swooped down from the sky and bore Nightcrawler out of range of the flying metal fragments.

Unfortunately, because she was looking over her shoulder to be sure they'd escaped the swarm, she didn't see the portion of their plane's wing that suddenly rose off the ground, into her path.

"Look out, lass!" Banshee cried, dipping in flight as he cut off his scream long enough to warn her.

Ororo was alerted to the danger too late. She slowed lightly and swerved but still flew into the barrier with a force that stunned both her and Nightcrawler. Together they plunged toward the snow. Streaking through the air. Banshee was able to reach them before they struck the ground. Their combined weight was too much for him to support alone. He slowed their descent enough to save them from serious injury, but all three fell heavily.

"That's a pretty follow-up to your speech about mutant solidarity, Magneto," Cyclops observed. "You're a fine one to talk about treachery!"

“A man does what he must,” the older mutant replied indifferently. “You’d be valuable as allies, but I cannot afford the luxury of mercy when dealing with my enemies.”

“Neither can we,” Cyclops answered. “Not when the safety of the entire world is at stake. We’re going to stop you . . . cold.”

Now Magneto turned the swarm of metallic shrapnel against the X-Men’s leader. Cyclops turned his force beam on the fragments and vaporized them. “You’ll have to do better than that to stop me.”

“So I see,” Magneto agreed. “I wonder . . . would you be able to use that power against a teammate?”

It was almost too late when Cyclops realized what Magneto meant. He heard Wolverine yell and leaped aside, just in time to avoid being ripped open by the Canadian’s claws. The villain was right. As long as he wielded an X-Man as a living weapon, Cyclops couldn’t defend himself.

“Look out, Summers!” Wolverine yelled, as he flew at his teammate again. “I can’t stop myself!”

“But I can,” Colossus announced, throwing his armored body in front of Cyclops and letting Wolverine strike him, absorbing the impact without injury. “Do your own fighting and let Wolverine alone,” he added, shaking a fist at Magneto.

Something strange happened to that fist. It dipped sharply to the right and then to the left as Colussus struggled to control it; then it struck Wolverine smartly.

The little Canadian fell to the snow. Colossus was aghast. “Wolverine! Are you all right?” he exclaimed, bending over his comrade. “I’m sorry! It was Magneto! He made me . . .”

Before he’d completed the apology, Wolverine rushed up out of the snow and hit Colossus. They fell together in a tangle of limbs and metal.

Five of the X-Men were down now, stunned or unconscious.

Cyclops rose from the snow and aimed his optic beam at the protective magnetic field again. “Okay, Magneto,” he announced, “now it’s just you and me.”

“And soon it will only be me,” Magneto agreed calmly. “What can you hope to accomplish alone that the rest of your team couldn’t do?”

“Stop you.” As he spoke, Cyclops opened his visor a little wider and began to advance, a pace at a time, on his enemy.

The villain’s complacent smile faded. Slowly, inexorably, the crimson force beam from Cyclops’ eyes was getting closer, gradually penetrating the field. Magneto glanced about desperately. There was nothing for him to seize as a weapon, no way for him to go back on

the offensive. Diverting any energy away from his defense now would be fatal.

And, to make matters worse, the other X-Men were regaining consciousness and beginning to rise.

Then Magneto smiled, as inspiration came to him. Careful not to relax his shield too much, he reached out with his magnetic powers, taking control of the mechanism that operated his young opponent's visor. Cyclops frowned, not understanding at first what had happened, when his visor began to open wider. Not wanting to waste his remaining power all at once, he reached up to close it. Then, just as he realized what Magneto was doing, the older mutant used his hold on the visor to swing Cyclops around and outward, so that the optic beam was directed against Cyclops' own teammates.

"No!" Cyclops yelled. "Everybody look out!"

Colossus and Wolverine, still lying where they'd fallen, were safe. Nightcrawler ducked, saved only by his own agility, and the two flying X-Men, warned by the cry, soared upward a little out of range.

"Magneto, stop!" Cyclops persisted. "You don't know what you're doing."

The mutant villain ignored Scott's warning, arrogantly mistaking it for an ineffectual threat. It was only after the damage, was done that he realized, to his horror, what a mistake he'd just made.

The force beam struck the frozen cliff that rose above them all, shearing through it at the base. With an ominous rumble, the ice began to topple inward. Before any of the mutants in the crevasse could get clear, the avalanche had buried them.

Where, moments before, there had been a small valley, filled with a flurry of activity, now all that remained was an expanse of still, silent whiteness. Of the dome, the missile, and the seven mutants, there was no sign.

The snow hadn't quite finished settling when Nightcrawler appeared on its surface with a pop, shaking it out of his fur. He turned around miserably, looking for some sign that his friends had survived. "Cyclops? Banshee? Peter? Please, someone answer me," he called, through chattering teeth. Without Storm to control it, the weather was already getting worse.

At first, the only answer to Nightcrawler's cries was the lonely wail of the wind. Then a patch of ice about fifteen feet from where he stood blasted outward. He rushed over to see who'd survived to cause this explosion. As Kurt reached him, Cyclops climbed out through the hole he'd created.

It took him a second to get his breath. "That . . . was the last burst I

had . . . Lucky . . .” he murmured. “Kurt, where are all the others?”

“There are no others,” Nightcrawler replied unhappily. “I think . . . maybe we’re the only ones who survived.”

“No!” Cyclops contradicted him firmly. “Except for Magneto, I was the closest to the cliff when it caved in. If I survived, the rest of the X-Men must have, too.”

“But . . .” Nightcrawler looked helplessly at the snow beneath his feet, “they may be hurt or trapped, low on air. Storm has claustrophobia. How can we get them out, before . . . ?”

“I think that problem may take care of itself,” Cyclops assured him, with something akin to a smile. “Listen.”

Now Nightcrawler could hear it, too, the faintly musical hum that penetrated the ice and air, growing steadily louder. About thirty seconds later, Banshee joined them on the surface of the avalanche.

At Cyclops’ direction, he used his power like sonar, to take soundings of the snow around them. When he found an obstruction, all three of them dug until they reached whatever it was. In this way. they unearthed Colossus and Wolverine (the metal surfaces of their bodies still resolutely stuck together), debris from their crashed plane, and Storm. The girl was near panic at being trapped, but otherwise, none of them had suffered any serious ill effects or injury.

When Cyclops said as much, Wolverine protested, trying to pull his hand away from Colossus. “I call this an ill effect! We’re still stuck, an’ Petey says he can’t change back to skin.”

“That’s tough luck, Laddie,” Banshee sympathized, a twinkle in his eye. “From the look o’ things. Magneto’s made magnets of ye both, one with a positive charge an’ one negative, so ye’d attract each other. But cheer up. If I remember my schoolin’ properly, artificial magnets soon lose their charge. All ye have to do is be patient. Things should be fine in a day or two.”

“Terrific,” Wolverine muttered. “Hey, Cyke, what are we gonna do about Magneto, anyway? Dig down an’ try an’ find the remains?”

“No,” Cyclops replied. “I think we’ve all had about as much as we can take. When we get back to the weather station we passed before, we can radio the Canadian government and let them take care of what’s buried here.

“Come on, X-Men,” he added, turning toward the southeast, “let’s call it a day. We have a long walk ahead of us.” With his teammates wearily following him, they began the long trek across the snowy wastes.

And because their eyes were turned toward Canada, and rescue, none of the X-Men noticed when, behind them, some of the metal

wreckage they'd unearthed began to move, slowly, painfully, digging its way into the mountain of snow and ice.

Fortunately for the X-Men, none of the meteorologists at the drifting ice station were too suspicious of the six strangely garbed strangers who'd survived a plane crash and then walked unprotected across the ice floes, without loss of life or limb, aided by suddenly halcyon weather conditions. They gave the mutants food and shelter and let them use the radio to contact the government and verify their security clearance.

Twelve hours after their arrival at the station, Xavier had arranged the X-Men's transportation home, aboard an airline whose employees were very discreet about the fact that one of their passengers looked like a demon, and that two others were stuck together like metallic Siamese twins.

On the flight home, Wolverine was morose and sullen, snapped at the flight attendant, and refused to talk to Colossus.

"What's wrong?" Storm asked him. "Are you sorry to be leaving Canada again, after all?"

"Are you kidding?" Wolverine growled. "I'm sorry I came back here in the first place." He addressed all of the X-Men, seated on the aisle in front of or across from him. "Let's face it, what did we accomplish? We didn't even beat Magneto. We don't even know what really happened to him."

"No," Cyclops agreed calmly. "We didn't beat him. He defeated himself. But do you really think he'd have ever made a mistake like that if we hadn't kept hammering away at him, together, every second? With a foe as powerful as he is, sometimes that's the best we can hope for. The important thing is that the world is safe."

"Safe? Hah!" Wolverine snorted. "Sure. With an atomic bomb just sitting under all that ice, waitin' for some other crazy to go up there an' get it."

"Ye haven't seen the mornin' paper yet, have ye?" asked Banshee. He picked up a newspaper that the flight attendant had given him and passed it to his teammate. "Says here that the world was stunned when, early this morning, an atomic blast rocked the area northwest of the Boothia Peninsula."

"Then that is that," Colossus remarked, satisfied. "The world is safe. Good."

"But they don't know they're safe!" Nightcrawler protested. "And no one knows that we are to thank for it."

"He's right, Scott," Storm said. "Don't you think we should ask the

professor to tell . . .” Her voice trailed off, and a smile lit her eyes. “I just had the most wonderful idea!”

“Well, don’t keep it to yourself, Ororo,” Cyclops encouraged her. “Share it with the rest of us.”

“All right. Didn’t the professor tell us that because no one knew what caused the missile accidents, all of the countries with atomic power were afraid to use their horrible weapons?”

There was silence in the cabin as the rest of the X-Men pondered Ororo’s words. Then, one after the other, they began to laugh.

“You’re right, Storm,” Cyclops agreed finally. “This is one victory that’s going to remain our little secret!”

THE INCREDIBLE HULK

MUSEUM PIECE

by LEN WEIN

He could not remember how it felt to be a man.

Now, as he crouched on the grimy Belle Glade rooftop, bare feet grinding into the tar paper, bare back glistening with sweat, he felt only hatred and pain and uncontrollable anger—and those were the emotions of the beast.

He could not remember how he came to be here, nor did it really matter. By now, one place of temporary refuge had become pretty much the same as the next, all of them blending together in a mindless miasma of shapes and shadows.

With animalistic caution, he peeked out over the edge of the condemned building at the tiny figures filling the street below him, scurrying around amidst the incessant blinking of red police lights like so many insignificant ants.

“You may as well surrender,” the mechanically amplified voice blared at him again from below. “We have the building surrounded. There’s no place left for you to run!”

But that was not true. There was always another place to run to, always another shadowed corner in which to hide. But he was tired of running, tired of hiding, and most immediately, he was tired of being annoyed.

Snarling, his great shingle of upper lip curled back over discolored gums, the brutish being rose to his full seven-foot height, his massive emerald-hued fists raised high over his tousled head in rage as he shouted down at his tormentors.

“Go away, little men! Leave Hulk alone! Leave Hulk in peace! Leave

now—or Hulk will smash!"

The response to the man-brute's anguished cry was regrettably predictable; a sporadic flurry of gunfire that struck jagged chips of brick and mortar from the edge of the roof. Several of the high-velocity slugs hit the raging Hulk himself, but they merely ricocheted harmlessly from his almost-indestructible green hide.

The gunfire served little purpose except to enrage the roaring man-brute still further. Turning away from the roof edge, his huge hands clenching and unclenching in mindless frustration, the Hulk sought a means to revenge himself on his persecutors. And, off to one side of the roof, he found it.

Lumbering across the peeling tar paper, the Green Goliath sank his thick, stubby fingers into the base of a large brick chimney. Then, with unnerving effortlessness, he ripped it free of its moorings.

Two swift strides brought him back to the building's edge, the crumbling chimney held high over his head. Carefully the Hulk peered out over the side once more. The little ants still scrambled about below him, pointing, shouting, filling the air with their irritating buzzing.

"Hulk warned you, little men, but you would not listen," the man-beast shouted, "and now you will pay!"

Then, with a savage snarl on his misshapen lips, he hurled the chimney at the milling crowd below.

Already weakened by the act of its uprooting, the chimney dissolved into a rain of brick and mortar even as it fell, scattering the police and the few gathered spectators, sending them scrambling for cover. The crumbling chunks of chimney hit the street like monstrous hailstones, splintering the windshields of the gathered police cars into spiderwebs of glass, a particularly large chunk punching a hole the size of a medicine ball through the hood of an unfortunate Chevelle.

For a moment, there was silence, punctuated only by the faint chink of broken glass falling to the sidewalk. Then, like rabbits after a rain, the police and the others stepped cautiously out from their hastily-grabbed cover. The monster still stood on the rooftop, railing against the sky.

Crouched back down behind one of the battered police cars, weapons in hand, two uniformed deputies stared up at the raging behemoth in slack-jawed amazement.

"Man, I ain't never seen nothin' like that brute," said Jack Shackleford, an extremely overweight deputy whose belly hung over his gun belt like a bulging sack of flour. "What in blazes *is* it anyway?"

"Don't you ever read the papers?" replied his partner, Claude

Hackett, who knew the answer to that before he even asked. After eight years as Shackleford's partner, he knew the man's interest in the fourth estate was devoted entirely to the racing forms on the sports page. Sighing softly, he continued.

"That's the monster they call the Hulk," Hackett explained, with the patience of someone trying to clarify nuclear physics for a five-year-old. "Accordin' to what I've read, he's really some sort of scientist guy who accidentally got caught in one o' them gamma-bomb tests they was makin' a few years back. He turns into that ugly green-skinned thingie whenever he gets mad, kind o' like that old Spencer Tracy movie—you know, 'Mr. Jekyll an' Dr. Hyde'?

"Anyhow, they say he ain't really responsible for what he does while he's this Hulk screwball—but you try tellin' that to the folks whose property he's wrecked, or the people he's busted up some."

"Yeah, pity the poor monster," Jack Shackleford replied with disgust. "There's always some bleedin' heart somewhere, tryin' to tell us there ain't nobody who's really rotten; they're just all misunderstood. Hell, next thing ya know, they'll be puttin' Hitler up for sainthood."

To emphasize his point, Shackleford spat into the street, spattering his boot in the process. "The question now is, how do we get that big green gorilla down from there?" Shackleford added, after a moment's thought. "Aside from burnin' it down around his ears, I can't think o' nothin'."

"There isn't much we *can* do, except wait for reinforcements," Hackett said, glancing down at his watch. "They ought'a be here any minute."

"Well, they better get here fast," Shackleford muttered, stifling a belch, "or there may not be much left for them to reinforce."

As if to add weight to the fat man's comment, another chunk of roofing material suddenly came sailing over the edge of the building, to smash harmlessly into the center of the street.

On the roof itself, the Hulk squatted, well back out of range of the futile gunfire that had provoked his violent actions in the first place, his feeble mind roiling in confusion. Why did the puny humans pursue him wherever he turned? Why would they never leave him in peace? And, most importantly, what was he going to do now?

In mindless frustration, the jade-headed giant smashed his massive basketball-sized fist through the roof at his feet, then threw back his shaggy head to bellow at the moonlit sky—only to find himself staring straight into a miniature sun.

Snarling in pain, the Hulk whirled away from the blinding brilliance, an arm thrown across his face to protect his piggish eyes

from the glare. And, blindly, he scrambled across the rooftop. The sunlike spotlight followed him wherever he moved, pinning him to the roof like an emerald butterfly.

"We have you covered, Hulk! Put up your hands and surrender—*now!"* The voice came from the sky this time, though just as mechanically cold and impersonal. Over the booming sound of the ultimatum, the blinded man-brute could hear the droning whupping of helicopter blades. So, once again the puny humans attacked Hulk with their flying machines.

With a bellowing roar, the Hulk tore free a section of the roofing already weakened by his frustrated blow, and hurled it blindly in the general direction of the aerial drone. The slab of roofing sliced through the air like a scythe, shearing off the tip of one of the copter blades, and sending the chopper spiraling down to an awkward emergency landing in the middle of the street.

But still, the light that was blinding the Hulk did not fade.

From behind his clenched eyelids, the man-brute suddenly heard the stuttering sound of machine-gun fire, and felt a stinging spray across his chest. But the bullets did not penetrate his impossibly thick hide. They merely left pale indentations across his glistening pectorals, like thumbprints on a new sunburn. Within seconds, the faint marks had faded completely and were gone.

"Ain't nothing this side of an atom bomb gonna put a dent in that green monster," said Deputy Malcolm Haywood to the pilot, as he squinted out of the second helicopter's cockpit at the raging emerald fury below.

"We're not done tryin' yet, Mal," replied Paul DuPree, as he eased the control stick to the left, sending the copter into a graceful turn. "We still have those gasbombs we requisitioned from the Federal Armory. That ugly freak may be bulletproof, but even *he* has to breathe . . . I hope."

"Well, if these things don't stop him," Haywood said, as he carefully hurled one of the grenadelike weapons toward the roof at the man-brute's feet. "We may as well just pack it in, and elect ol' Jade-Jaws the mayor of the city."

The gas grenade struck the roof with a soft *chuff,* sending clouds of noxious gas billowing into the air. In an instant, the clinging fumes had enveloped the Hulk completely, sending him into violent spasms of coughing. Futilely, the man-monster waved his brawny arms before him, trying to drive the irritating clouds away, but his desperate efforts gradually grew weaker and weaker.

"No! Gas will not beat Hulk! *Nothing* can beat Hulk!" The angry giant was ranting now, as if his words could somehow deny a fate his

actions were helpless to prevent. Snarling low in his throat, the Hulk glared up at the helicopter circling high above him, the fumes from the stultifying gas serving to diffuse the harsh glare of the chopper's mounted spotlight.

"Machine," growled the man-brute. "Always they attack Hulk with machines . . . but Hulk . . . will not . . . be beaten . . ."

With the last vestiges of his rapidly fading strength, the monster hunched down, fists clenched at his sides, then leaped upward as if shot from a cannon, the most powerful leg muscles on the face of the earth propelling him high into the sky, even as the force of his leap collapsed what remained of the ravaged roof.

"Get us the hell outta here, Paul," Haywood shouted as he saw the savage shape hurtling relentlessly toward them. But it was already far too late.

Even as DuPree swung the copter away, the Hulk's viselike fingers closed around the landing runners on either side of the aircraft, leaving him dangling beneath the chopper, while giving the bizarre impression that he was holding it over his head.

"For God's sake, *do* something!" shouted the panicky Haywood, as he felt the copter lurch with the sudden added weight.

"There's nothing much I can do," DuPree replied, "except try to shake him loose before he tears us apart." And, with that, he threw the copter into an accelerated climb, its rotors straining against the extra effort.

Below the whirlybird, the Hulk dangled helplessly, already all but unconscious from the noxious fumes he had inhaled, his sausage fingers still gripping the runners more from sheer stubbornness than any real show of strength. It was only the chill night air rushing past his face as the helicopter spun wildly across the city that kept the man-brute awake.

"What in heaven's name is that monster made of?" Haywood asked of no one in particular, as the copter headed south out of Belle Glade toward the sprawling Everglades, which spread out before them for almost 4,000 square miles.

"The copter can't take much more of this," DuPree said fearfully. "Unless we can unload that monster, we're going down—and fast!"

"Ain't there anything you can do?" Haywood shouted over the roar of the aircraft's straining engines.

"We have only one chance," DuPree replied, "and it's a slim one. Just hang onto your teeth, Mal. We're taking Greenjeans for a little ride."

Pushing the control stick all the way forward, DuPree threw the

wounded chopper into a sudden dive, the swaying stands of cypress trees rushing up to meet them. Then, at the last possible instant. DuPree pulled back on the stick for all he was worth. The copter shuddered, the engine screamed, and then the craft snapped skyward again.

The sudden wrench on his. already exhausted arms was more than the Hulk could endure. His numbed fingers lost their tentative grip on the helicopter's runner, and like some monstrous wounded bird, he plunged toward the swamp below.

Back aboard the copter, Paul DuPree finally regained control of his battered craft. He breathed a long, low sigh of relief, then brought the chopper around to search for some sign of his erstwhile passenger.

"You see anything down there?" DuPree asked Haywood.

"You're kidding, aren't you?" the deputy replied. "You could lose the entire Seventh Fleet down in that endless maze of cypress and buttonwood, and not find it for a thousand years. Even if that monster survived the fall in the first place, there's not a chance in hell he'll ever find his way out of there alive."

At first, the sounds were the familiar sounds of midnight; the monotonous croaking of a southern bullfrog, the piercing cry of a lonely heron, the soft slish of a crocodile slipping hungrily into the saw grass.

Then, suddenly, a new sound rose amidst the mire, stunning the others into silence; it was the outraged bellow of a monstrous green-skinned behemoth, who had plunged into the murky waters of the Everglades in a gas-induced haze.

For a moment, the man-monster paused, glancing around in confusion at the endless sprawl of cypress, mangrove, cocoa-plum, and sea-grape trees. Off in the distance, brilliant spikes of orchids formed crude yet beautiful hanging gardens in the hammocks.

"What is Hulk doing in this place of mud and water? What has happened to the puny humans Hulk was fighting?"

In characteristic confusion, the green Goliath scratched his shaggy head. "Hulk does not know. Hulk never knows. But maybe now Hulk will finally be left in peace."

Aimlessly, the man-brute began to lumber through the mossy bog, staring in bemusement at the small creatures who fled in terror as he approached. For a time, he ambled on in silence, then all at once, he paused, his lantern jaw slack in amazement. On a mossy log before him perched a radiant monarch butterfly, unmoving, seemingly unafraid of this awesome intruder.

Enchanted by this rare display of beauty, the Hulk reached out a tentative hand to touch the fragile creature, then paused. Something inside him, some primitive animal instinct, suddenly sensed danger.

A snarl on his lips, the man-brute whirled, to find a quartet of crocodiles slithering silently toward him. “Bah, it is only lizards,” said the Hulk with disdain. “Go away, lizards. Stop following Hulk. Hulk does not want you.”

But the hungry reptiles definitely wanted him.

Almost before the man-monster could react, the crocs were upon him, their razored jaws clamping tightly about his arms and legs. Roaring in mindless fury, the Hulk grappled with his new tormentors, churning the brackish waters around them into a foaming froth.

The sound of the savage struggle brought the inevitable watchers to the water’s edge; mostly squirrels, raccoons, and otters drawn by a kind of primal curiosity. But there was one creature summoned near by its bizarre empathic nature. The creature was somewhat humanoid in shape, standing almost eight feet tall, though hideously hunchbacked. It was covered entirely by moss and muck and dripping strands of rotting saw grass, and its “face” was framed by two carrotlike protuberances, and lit by two unblinking crimson eyes. A third carrotlike protuberance formed the creature’s nose. Once, in another life, a seeming eternity ago, the creature had been a human scientist named Ted Sallis, the inventor of the experimental serum that had so hideously transformed him, but now this shambling, muck-encrusted mockery of life was nothing more than a—*Man-Thing!*

But even as the Man-Thing stood silently watching, still another spectator lolled lazily in the moss-draped branches above the battle, its slitted eyes casually studying the conflict raging below, biding its time, waiting with characteristic patience . . .

Until the moment was right to strike!

“Huh? Now snake attacks Hulk too. Tries to strangle Hulk. But Hulk will—”

At that instant, an emerald foot slipped on the slimy bottom mud, and the rest of the jade giant’s protest was lost beneath the swirling waters, along with the green Goliath himself.

For several interminable seconds, the Man-Thing’s unblinking orbs gazed at the churning, bubbling mire, then he shambled forward. For, although he could not think as such, the murk-dweller could somehow sense that this strange newcomer to the swamp would perish without his help.

But, for once, it seemed the Man-Thing’s unnatural instincts had failed him. For an awesomely powerful green-skinned figure suddenly erupted from the murky morass—alone.

Still snarling, the Hulk reached down into the muddy water, and lifted a writhing reptilian bundle high over his head. In some incomprehensible manner, he had actually tangled the crocodiles and the yards-long constrictor into a crude ball. Then, with less effort than it would take a normal man to toss away a wadded ball of paper, the Hulk hurled the struggling mass high out over the sprawl of mangrove trees, and completely out of sight.

Then, with almost comic deliberation, the man-brute dusted off his massive hands, and snarled. “There! Next time, puny lizards will think twice before they bother Hulk. Hulk wants to be left alone—and Hulk means it!”

With a dispassionate eye, the Man-Thing watched as the Hulk lumbered away in triumph, then the slimy swamp beast turned and likewise shambled away—in the opposite direction.

The cool night breeze had finally dried the dripping Hulk when, at last, he ceased his relentless lumbering. His rage finally abated now, he paused, looking around, to find himself in a quiet clearing, the earth firm beneath his feet for the first time in hours.

“It is . . . quiet here,” the Hulk said softly, as if afraid of disturbing what he had found, “and Hulk is . . . tired.”

Glancing around, the man-brute noticed a fallen log at the very edge of the clearing, moss growing thick and soft along one side. “Hulk is tired . . . and Hulk will sleep.”

Typically, the emerald behemoth had already forgotten his towering rage of several hours earlier. Like an animal, he pressed himself flat against the grassy sward, then curled up with his head against the fallen log, using it much like a pillow.

Moments later, the glade was filled with the unusual sound of raucous snoring—a sound that, slowly, inevitably, grew softer, as the terrible anger that drove the Hulk faded into oblivion. And, as his pounding pulse rate began to slow down, a remarkable change came over the incredible Hulk. Within seconds, the monster’s massively thick body began to dwindle in size, growing smaller, softer, until it became the thin frail body of a man.

And Doctor Robert Bruce Banner slept the sleep of the deservedly exhausted, unaware that he was no longer alone in his swampy sanctuary.

Dawn broke through the tangled mangroves in splintered columns of rosy light, a particularly energetic beam striking the slumbering Bruce Banner squarely in the eyes. Banner awoke with a start, his eyes snapping open instantly. And the huddled figure who stood watching

him from behind a sheltering tree bole flinched visibly at the sudden movement.

"Wh-where am I?" Banner asked, staring around at his swampy surroundings in customary confusion. There was one thing certain about sharing one's life with the incredible Hulk; it made for an overabundance of rude awakenings. Rubbing the sleep from his eyes with the backs of his hands. Banner rose to his feet, trying to make some sense out of the jumbled fragments of memory he still shared with his emerald alter ego.

"Let's see," said Banner, as he counted on his fingers. "I remember having dinner at an old diner in the town of Belle Glade, Florida, and not enjoying the meal very much. Then I remember two big goons in black-leather jackets, asking me for a light. And then—oh, God, and *then!* They shouldn't have tried to mug me, shouldn't have made me angry, shouldn't have made me . . . change. I can't remember what the Hulk did to them, but I do vaguely remember what he did to that town. He reduced it to so much—"

Snap!

"Eh? That sound . . . like something stepping on a twig. I'm not alone here. Someone—or something—has been watching me from the shadows. I can almost *feel* it."

Cautiously, Banner moved across the clearing in the direction of the sound—and his unknown observer broke from cover in mindless panic. Banner gaped at the fleeing figure in astonishment.

"Lord, it looks like . . . a man," Banner thought. Then he shouted, "Hey, wait, fella! Don't run away! There's nothing to be afraid of! I want to talk to you!" But the figure ran on through the undergrowth, unheeding.

"Blast it, mister, come back here." Banner hollered, as he took off in pursuit. "I'm not going to hurt you! I just want to ask you a few questions!

"Do you hear me?" roared Banner, as he closed the gap between them. "Either you stop *now*—or I'm going to have to stop you!"

And with that, Banner hurled himself across the narrowing gap between himself and his quarry, tackling him about the ankles, bringing him down.

"Now why don't we talk about this like civilized—*huh?"* Banner stood over his fallen prey in disbelief, not quite certain what to say next. Several interminable seconds passed as the frail nuclear physicist stared down at the figure sprawled before him. The figure was human —that much at least was certain—and it was a man. It was also quite bald, its softly sculpted body entirely devoid of any hair. And its complexion bore a sickly gray pallor. The man was clad only in a

clumsy loincloth of saw grass and leaves. Even though Banner himself only wore a pair of tattered purple trousers, he suddenly felt somehow overdressed. But the most unnerving thing about the fallen figure was the sound it was making; a faint whimper, like the cry of a wounded animal.

Banner saw the primitive fear mirrored in the bald man's eyes, and approached him, cautiously, softly. "Hey, I'm sorry, fella. I didn't mean to get violent. Believe me, that's very unlike me," Banner crooned gently. "Who are you? What are you doing way out here alone? Can you speak English?"

But again, the bald man did not answer, though the uncertainty, the horror, that burned behind his eyes spoke more eloquently than mere words ever could.

"C'mon, fella, there's nothing to be afraid of," Banner said, putting his hand to his chest in a self-effacing gesture. "Look at me. I'm just like you. I don't want to frighten you, or hurt you. I just want to be your . . . friend."

Smiling tentatively, Banner reached out to the figure whimpering before him. "Here. Give me your hand. Let me help you up," Banner offered. "It's the least I can do after knocking you down."

At first, the bald man was hesitant, but something in Banner's soothing tone calmed him. At last, he reached out his pallid gray hand.

"That's the way, buddy," Banner said, as he put his arm around the bald man's cold shoulders, and led him back to the clearing. "Let's find ourselves a place to sit down. You and I have a lot to talk over."

As the bald man followed his lead, Banner thought, "Poor guy, must be an escapee from some local asylum. He doesn't stand a chance of surviving out here much longer by himself. And there's something about him, a kind of mindless innocence, that reminds me of the Hulk. I can't just abandon him here. I guess I owe the child in my emerald alter ego *that* much at least—not to mention what I owe to myself."

An hour of patient attempted conversation in the clearing, sitting on the mossy log that shortly before had been the Hulk's pillow, yielded nothing. As near as Banner could ascertain, the bald man was utterly mute, and intelligent on only the most primitive, simple level. "There's nothing I can do for him—or me—except to find us a way out of this mucky mess," Banner muttered softly at last.

"Come on, pal," he said, turning to his bald companion, and urging him to his feet. "We've got miles to go before we sleep."

With the cool dispassion of the scientist that he was, Bruce Banner studied the position of the mid-morning sun. "We'd better head north," he told his companion, knowing full well he was not

understood. “From what I remember about the geography of the Florida Everglades, that’s our best shot at hitting civilization of a sort.”

“Assuming, of course, we manage to make it that far alive,” he added mentally. Then he cursed himself for his pessimism.

As they walked, Banner noticed his companion stealing furtive glances to either side of their path, his eyes darting back and forth like the moist eyes of a frightened squirrel. Obviously, the bald man was searching for someone. “Maybe his warders,” thought Banner, without really thinking.

Smiling, the thin physicist patted his companion gently on the back. “Look, I don’t know who you think is after you, pal, but I think you can probably stop worrying about them. Take a good look around you. We’re smack in the middle of 4,000 square miles of smelly swamp. There’s nobody else alive out here for miles in every direction except you and—”

“There be our prize, me buckos. *Take ’im!”*

The voice was cold, harsh, and totally unexpected. But the shocking voice was nothing compared to the shocking visage of its owner. The speaker appeared to be a pirate. That’s right, a *pirate*—a character straight out of the seventeenth century, clad in pegged pants, brocaded waistcoat, and silk shirt open to the waist. Beneath a broad-brimmed upturned captain’s hat, his black hair was clumsily braided, and bound in rings of gold. In his hand, he carried a broad cutlass that gleamed in the hazy sunlight.

And worse, he stood at the head of an entire pirate crew, each one uglier and more foul tempered than the next, and all brandishing a most impressive array of deadly cutlery.

“Sweet mother of mercy,” whispered Banner, who stood transfixed, refusing to believe what he was seeing, firmly convinced the heat and the humidity had begun to affect his mind. His bald companion clung to Banner like a child, pleading for his protection.

“Stand aside, mate,” the captain of the crew shouted to Banner. “ ’Tis ol’ Baldie we come fer. We have no truck with ye.”

With uncustomary courage, Banner stood his ground. “Look, I don’t know what circus you characters escaped from, but I’m not going to stand by and let you take *anyone*—least of all my talkative friend.”

“Weigh yer next words carefully, mate,” warned the pirate captain. “I tell ye we have no squabble with ye, but we mean to have ol’ Baldie —even if it’s over yer corpse!”

As the bald man cowered back against the bole of a broad

mangrove, Banner did his best to look threatening. “I’m only going to tell you this once, Blackbeard,” he said, “but if you pick a fight with *me,* you’re letting yourself in for a lot more than any of you can handle.”

“Am I now?” asked the pirate captain, as he stepped forward suddenly. “Well, Captain Horatio Skragg ain’t never met the man he couldn’t take, with the edge of his blade, or the back of his good right hand.” And with a single savage backhand blow, he sent Banner sprawling.

Lying awkwardly on the sward, Banner wiped his bleeding mouth with the back of one hand. “Okay, mister, I warned you,” he snarled under his breath. “I’ve taken a lot of bruises in my time and, frankly, I’m sick of it. Nobody is going to knock me down anymore—without getting *flattened* in return!”

Even as he finished speaking, Banner lunged forward, driving himself into Captain Skragg’s midriff, sending the buccaneer stumbling back into the thick of his fellows.

“All right, ye scurvy scut, I gave ye yer chance,” Skragg screamed at the defiant Banner. “At ’im, lads! Let daylight through him!”

Like a pack of howling wolves, the bloodthirsty pirates swarmed over the waiting Bruce Banner, and in an instant, the slender scientist was lost beneath the press of snarling bodies. The sudden, violent exertion as Banner struggled to save his life had the usual result.

Where once Robert Bruce Banner lay smothered beneath a mound of struggling flesh, now a monstrous green-skinned Goliath rose to his feet, shrugging off the little men who clung to him like the proverbial duck sheds rain.

“Go away, puny humans,” roared the man-brute angrily. “Hulk does not know what Hulk is doing back in swamp, but Hulk did not come here to be attacked by more little men. Leave Hulk alone, puny humans—or Hulk will make you *sorry!”*

But even as the jade-hued giant ranted, two of the pirate crew stole behind him. Unseen by the Hulk, they grabbed the terrified bald man, and started to carry him off; and then, at last, the bald man spoke.

Or, rather, screamed.

The bald man’s howling resounded across the clearing, and a twisted fragment of memory somewhere deep within the incredible Hulk’s feeble mind responded to the urgent cry.

“No!” roared the brute, as he leaped forward, the sheer ferocity of his lunge causing the two startled pirates to drop their terrified burden. And before they could move, the Hulk grabbed the two hapless seamen, clutching their heads in his oversized hands like a

child would hold two apples.

"Hulk will not let puny humans take quiet man away! Quiet man is Hulk's friend! And Hulk needs all the friends Hulk can get!" Thus saying, the green Goliath slammed the two struggling pirates together, their heads making a sickening hollow sound as they slumped into unconsciousness.

"Now Hulk and quiet man are leaving here," snarled the monster as he helped the bald mute to his feet, "and Hulk will smash anyone who —*huh?"*

The clangor of tempered steel interrupted the man-brute's diatribe, as two other pirates swung their cutlasses at his back, only to watch them shatter against his almost-impenetrable flesh. "Rum an' thunder," muttered one of the buccaneers. "This big green bilge rat ain't nothin' *human!"*

The Hulk did not deign to reply, save to slap the two cutthroats across the clearing with the back of one monstrous hand. The remaining pirates charged as one, as the Hulk braced for their attack. "C'mon, me hearties," shouted Captain Skragg. "That lizard-livered lubber can't take us all! This time we'll cut 'im to ribbons!"

"Hulk warned little men, but they would not listen! Stupid humans never listen—and they always regret it!" With savage fury, the monster slammed his awesome fist into the ground before him, creating a shock wave that spread across the clearing, toppling the attacking pirates like tenpins, the impossible vibrations hurling several of them straight up into the air.

"You!" snarled the Hulk at the airborne Horatio Skragg, as he cocked back that monstrous emerald fist. "You are the one who told the others to attack Hulk, so you are the one Hulk will—"

"Stop, Hulk! The battle is over!"

At the sound of this new voice behind him, the Hulk turned, allowing his intended victim to strike the ground once more, battered but otherwise intact. "Who—?" the man-brute asked in confusion.

"Do not strain your feeble brain trying to recognize me, Hulk. For, though I know more about you than is imaginable, we have never met. Those you have been fighting here belong to me, as all things worth possessing belong to—the Collector!"

As the Hulk stood snarling, an ancient yet ageless figure stepped into the clearing. An ordinary-seeming man, his face was lined and patterned with age, yet his walk was brisk with youth. Silvery hair swept neatly back, he could have passed for a typical executive, had this been Wall Street and had he been dressed in a Brooks Brothers suit. But this was the heart of the Everglades, and instead he wore a curious cloak and rust-brown tunic that gave no hint of his natural

time or place.

And the silent man at the opposite side of the clearing was obviously more afraid of this newcomer than of death itself. A fact that did not go unnoticed, even by the usually less than perceptive Hulk.

"Go away, prune face, you are scaring Hulk's friend," the green Goliath grumbled. "Go away—or Hulk will smash!" Even as the man-brute spoke, he lumbered across the swampy ground toward the self-proclaimed Collector, who reacted not at all to the Hulk's snarled threat. Except to laugh.

"If you're all that anxious for a fight, brute, you're more than welcome to one . . . but not with me," the Collector said as he gestured toward the shifting ferns behind him as an impresario might gesture toward a curtain. "You'll have to face my new *champion* instead—the latest addition to my ever-expanding collection.

"You'll have to fight—the *Man-Thing!"*

Dripping slime in its wake, the murk-dweller shuffled forward through the foliage, to stand awkwardly at the Collector's side. Even the Hulk, who had seen countless hideous creatures in his wanderings, reacted to the Man-Thing's presence. But, typically, his reaction was not horror, but rage.

"Carrot-nose is against Hulk, too?"

"Indeed, brute. The Man-Thing is completely under my control," the Collector said, as he gestured toward the silent swamp creature in wordless command. "And I order him now to strike!"

"Hulk is not afraid of carrot-nose . . . not afraid of prune face," roared the jade-skinned giant as he braced for the Man-Thing's assault. "Hulk is not afraid of anything!"

Carrot-nose. Prune face. The names seem almost comical, but as ever, they were highly descriptive of those they were meant to represent. In his primitive fashion, the Hulk had a way of getting to the gist of things. But now the emerald giant's speech became little more than a guttural growl, as the Man-Thing shambled almost reluctantly toward him. Still, reluctant or not, the blow the murk-dweller's misshapen claw struck the Hulk was a heavy one.

The man-brute roared as he stumbled backward, more in surprise than in pain. His massive fist drew back to deliver a punch that could shatter a battleship to fragments. And he struck—with no result.

"Huh? Hulk's fist goes right through carrot-nose?!"

And indeed it had. The unnaturally sculpted slime that gave the Man-Thing form seemed to part as the Hulk's clenched fist passed through it harmlessly, closing again behind the fist like waters around

a dropped stone. No grimace of pain crossed the Man-Thing's expressionless face, but the creature's crimson eyes gazed deep into those of his emerald foe, as if searching to find something there.

Then, as the Hulk stared uncomprehendingly at the fist still mired in what should have been the Man-Thing's stomach, the Collector spoke again. "Swiftly, my slave," he shouted, "while the Hulk is confused—*strike!"*

Whether the Man-Thing truly understood the Collector's words is doubtful, and wholly unimportant. All that matters is that his unique empathic nature was attuned to the myriad emotions raging in the souls of those around him. He sensed the fervor of the Collector's insatiable need, and the Hulk's boundless anger and frustration. And, almost despite himself, the Man-Thing brought both of what once had been his hands slamming down upon the Hulk's shaggy head.

Before, the man-brute's anger had been focused upon those who wished to take his new found friend from him: the still-dazed pirates and the gloating Collector. But now the Hulk had finally found a foe powerful enough to take the full brunt of his rage. And now the Hulk went mad!

As he rose, the green Goliath reached out, as an ordinary being might reach for support. But the Hulk needed no support. Instead, he was reaching for a weapon, something with which to strike back, something that might hurt the muck-dripping creature that now stood silently before him.

An enormous emerald hand gripped the trunk of a mangrove tree that had stood in the swamp for decades beyond number, his stumpy fingers digging deep gouges as they sunk into the bark. Then, as he turned back to the battle, a muscle flexed on the man-brute's arm. The twitch of muscle was almost imperceptible, a mere ripple on a sea of vibrant green, but it was enough.

The mangrove tree flew across the clearing at the Man-Thing.

Even as the tree passed through the murk-dweller's unmoving form as had the Hulk's brawny fist before it, the Collector turned his attention away from the two monsters. His smile grew twisted, becoming somehow even more evil than it had been before, as his billowing cloak rippled slightly in the breeze the hurtling mangrove had stirred. Then he strode purposefully toward the huddled, frightened form of the Hulk's mute friend, he who was the cause of the battle now raging.

"Now, my silent friend, while your emerald ally is otherwise occupied, I will finally attend to you," the Collector said to the cowering figure. "To be truthful, I could almost forgive you your trespasses for having brought such fine new exhibits to my attention:

first, the Man-Thing, and now the incredible Hulk.

"But you yourself were such an interesting exhibit before you so thoughtlessly chose to run away from me. And you shall be my exhibit once more, after a touch of the legendary Philosopher's Stone!"

Again, the Collector's cloak rippled in the breeze, drifting almost purposefully past his hand, and from a hidden pocket within the cape the enigmatic figure drew forth a simple-looking stone. Though it appeared to be merely the sort of pebble one might find at the side of the road, it was in fact the stuff of which myths are made. For centuries beyond numbering, kings and emperors had sought this petrified promise of boundless riches, this facetless gem capable of changing the very nature of matter.

The Philosopher's Stone glowed briefly, bathing the Hulk's mute friend in its unimaginable energies, and beginning a most terrifying transformation.

Slowly, the mute man's pallid body was beginning to melt, like the clay it so greatly resembled, a living statue gradually being stripped of its very shape and form. The horrified mute said nothing, even as his features were twisted into a grotesque blur, leaving the barest hint of a face, which still mirrored a single expression.

It was an expression of horror and self-loathing beyond description; and it only served to make the Collector's satisfied smirk grow that much wider.

"You really are far more interesting in your natural form, you know. Why should I, who have Adonis himself among my exhibits, place any value on another creature in humanoid form? Especially when I can have instead a creature unique in all the galaxies—the golem, supernatural defender of the Jews of sixteenth-century Prague, sculpted from unliving clay by the Rabbi Judah Loew Ben Bezalel, and charged to obey its master!

"Well, *I* am your master now, Golem—and I order you to stop the rampaging Hulk!"

The clay creature lumbered forward, as obedient in its current form as it had been fearful when seemingly human. And while the Hulk pounded away mercilessly at the Man-Thing's yielding slime, the golem mournfully joined the fray.

The clay creature's moist fists slammed down on the Hulk's head like living pile drivers, smashing the green goliath to the ground. But even as the Hulk's face met the swampy soil, his tortured mind struggled to form a question.

"Who attacks Hulk from behind? *Who?"*

The emerald titan's brutish face twisted with rage as the answer

lumbered toward him.

"Another one," snarled the man-brute. "Carrot-nose has a friend. But Hulk does not care how many friends carrot-nose has! Hulk will smash them all!"

"Then smash away, brute! It will not harm the golem," the Collector said as a jade-hued fist splattered into the clay creature's chest. "He is as far beyond your power as is the Man-Thing himself!"

The Hulk stared down long and hard at the clay that clung to his ponderous fist where it had struck the golem. *"Huh?* It is clay. Like carrot-nose is made of slime.

"How can Hulk fight clay and slime?" the man-monster roared, instinctively knowing the answer, even as the Collector spoke once more.

"The answer is simple, brute. You *can't!"*

And, as if taking their cue from the Collector's pronouncement, the two misshapen creatures under his thrall slammed into the Hulk at precisely the same second, with enough force to turn a mountain into a gravel pit.

It was enough to knock the man-brute to his knees.

Awkwardly, impossibly, the two misbegotten monsters shambled up to their barely more human opponent. And, in response to a softly spoken command from the Collector, the macabre Man-Thing's clawlike hand reached out, clutching the stunned Hulk by the back of his head, and driving the man-brute's face deep into the soggy mire of the murk-dweller's chest.

For seconds that stretched into eternities, the green Goliath struggled in vain to free himself from the Man-Thing's grasp, struggles that gradually grew weaker, then grew still. For, even though the Hulk could survive without air far longer than any mere human, even he could not long remain conscious when he had forgotten to hold his breath.

For a moment, a shout of triumph was the only sound that could be heard in the isolated clearing, then there came a gentle plopping noise as the jade-hued giant sprawled to the sward, unconscious.

"You've done well, my obedient ones," nodded the Collector in satisfaction. "And thus do I add yet another wonder to my precious collection."

"Aye, sir, and an ugly one-indeed," said Captain Skragg, stroking his beard as if in thought. "Sorry we weren't more help to ye, sir, but beasties such as these ain't fit fer the likes of us to cross swords with."

"I shall take your line of reasoning into account at the proper time," replied the Collector, casting a baleful glance the pirate's way. "Now.

Captain, if you and your men would be so kind as to pick the Hulk up?"

"All right, ye lubbers, ye heard the man," Skragg shouted, hoping this sudden show of enthusiasm might somehow balance his earlier cowardice. "Now put yer surly backs into it."

As one, eight pirates pulled at the Hulk's inert form, straining with all their strength to lift him from the ground. Three tugged at an arm as thick as the trunk of a young oak tree, raising it off the ground only inches.

"We're tryin' to lift 'im, Cap'n, I swear we are," moaned one of the struggling sailors.

"This bilge rat must weigh a ton!" muttered another under his breath, even as the remainder of the pirate crew moved forward to help.

"Half a ton, to be precise, gentlemen." the Collector said in measured tones. "But if you all combine your efforts. I'm certain we can begin our journey through this annoying swamp.

"I've gotten what I came for," gloated the ageless enigma, "and now it's time to go home."

It was a bizarre procession that moved through the thick of the Everglades, scattering the birds from the trees as it drew closer, sending white ibis, brown mallards. and snowy egrets screaming into the sky: a dozen men garbed as pirates from a vanished era, carrying an unmoving green giant across their shoulders as if he were a statue carved of purest jade: flanked by two humanoid creatures formed of clay and slime respectively: and their swiftly striding master, who led the procession through the tangled undergrowth with the confidence of a man who had walked under the light of a thousand different stars.

They passed swiftly through the swamp, the lush vegetation growing more and more sparse, until they stepped out into another clearing—a far larger clearing than the first, scorched clean by the unnatural fire that had created it. The scars from the flames were orderly, spreading in concentric circles from the very center of the clearing. And, in that center, there sat a great gleaming starship, rising from the muck and mire like a heavenly jewel.

At the Collector's approach, an entryway suddenly yawned wide in the side of the shining vessel, but not nearly so wide as mortal eyes would have grown if they could have seen into the ship for even an instant. For, though the vessel was several hundred feet long on the outside, on the inside, it seemed to go on forever. Every inch contained a niche that was filled with something more incredible than that which had filled the niche before, a gathering of objects from fact

and fable and fantasy.

This then was the home of the Collector, and it was, quite simply, beyond belief.

“This way, my obedient ones. I have a display case all ready and waiting for my newest acquisitions,” the Collector said, looking straight ahead as he strolled past a glass case containing two stone tablets carved with ten sentences in Aramaic that had changed the destiny of the Earth.

“Once this exhibit belonged to the golem alone, but now he can share it with his newfound companions.” The Collector gestured toward a section of the seemingly endless ship where a section of swamp had been recreated, much the way a zoo might furnish the cage of a captured animal with the proper environment. Unlike any zoo, however, no barrier stood between the swamp setting and the rest of the ship, at least none that the eye could see.

“Captain Skragg, if your men would be so kind as to attach the stasis shackles to the ankles of my new guests, and to the ankle of the golem as well, please?”

“Aye, sir. I’m sure ye want ’em to feel right at home,” the pirate captain said, even as his men slipped the great gray shackles around the stumplike legs of the three monsters.

“All right, sir. We’ve done as ye asked of us,” Skragg said as the last shackle snapped into place. “What now?”

“Now, my dear Captain? Now I have a little surprise for you all. You’ve accomplished the task I set for you, at least to the best of your limited ability, so it’s time I put you all back where you belong,” the Collector said, his malevolent smile spreading across his cracked and rutted face once more.

“Master—*no!* We’ve served ye faithfully an’ well!” The pirate captain who had once razed a city of seven thousand innocent souls now flinched visibly as he stared into the Collector’s unfathomable eyes. “Please, mate,” he begged. “Ye can’t do this to us!”

“Ah, but that is where you are wrong, Captain Skragg.” Even as he spoke, the Collector removed his hand from within the folds of his voluminous cloak, and that which he now held glistened brightly in the light.

“There is nothing I would not do to further my collection,” laughed the ageless entity as his gloved hand moved in an arcane gesture, “and no collection would be complete without a genuine ship-in-a-bottle!”

An unholy light suddenly blossomed around the terrified pirate crew, and then vanished—taking Captain Horatio Skragg and his men with it. Then the Collector looked down contentedly at the bottle he

held in his hand, listening with amusement to the tiny, almost imcomprehensible voices screaming up at him.

"Now, now, Captain. Language such as that will certainly do nothing to help your cause," purred the Collector. "One would think that after spending 300 years in this bottle, you'd have gotten used to it by now.

"Ah, well, after I put you back on your shelf, you'll have another three centuries to grow accustomed to your situation."

The Collector hefted the precious bottle and moved off into the ship, his laughter growing deeper with every step he took. He had enriched his collection once more, and now was the time to savor the moment . . . before his roving eye began to seek a *new* treasure.

As the maniacal laughter faded down a distant corridor, the two misshapen monsters shambled slowly closer to the unconscious Hulk sprawled awkwardly before them. With seemingly limitless patience, they stood immobile, watching the monotonous rising and falling of the man-brute's brawny chest, totally absorbed by the only movement within their microcosmic cage.

Thus, they were there to bear witness when the unnatural slumber began to work its magic on the Hulk, fading his emerald skin to pale pink flesh, reducing his massive form to mere mortal dimensons, transforming the raging brute once more into the all-too human Bruce Banner.

Almost sympathetically, the Man-Thing's slimy claw reached out, brushing Banner's cheek, and the frail physicist was awake in an instant, with the chill of the grave sneaking up his spine.

Banner had grown used to awakening in strange surroundings, since he'd begun sharing his life with the incredible Hulk. He had become quite adaptable, unflappable, and resolute in his determination to make the most of his vast intelligence in those brief periods when he was completely himself.

Looking up as his eyes opened, it took Banner only seconds to study his environment, his scientist's mind swiftly adding up the facts and reaching the inevitable conclusion.

"Right. I'm still in the Everglades somewhere; and, from the look of things, I've picked up a couple of traveling companions along the way."

A calm, reasoned analysis of the situation, though hardly an accurate one.

"Well, since those two oversized uglies aren't bothering me, I'm certainly not going to bother them. I think I'll just try to find the

nearest possible exit," Banner said, moving cautiously toward the edge of the swampy clearing. Then suddenly he collided with something that wasn't there.

"Eh? There's something barring my path—something I can't see!" Banner's field of expertise was nuclear science, the mastery of those same freakish gamma rays that had eventually turned him into the Hulk. He'd seen many strange things since that fateful day of the gamma-bomb test, and thus he knew what was facing him now.

"It's a force field of some sort. I can't get past it, and I think I know why. There's some sort of shackle on my leg, so light I didn't even notice it when I awoke.

"Since the shackle isn't chained to anything, it must have another purpose, and I'll bet eight to five it's designed to activate the force field. Nothing else makes any sense.

"But any shackle designed to hold the extra-thick ankle of the Hulk should slip over my thinner ankle with very little difficulty." Banner grinned, as he pulled his bare foot free of the restraining shackle. For an instant, he thought his troubles were over, but as the shackle dropped to the ground and he started forward once more, he began to realize the true dimensions of his problem.

Stepping through the leaves and out of the artificial swamp environment into the heart of the Collector's starship. Banner gazed around, amazed. Everywhere he turned, he beheld the fantastic. To the left stood the treasures of a pharaoh, displayed within a large glass case as if in a museum, though each piece of metal was oddly untouched by age. To Banner's right, a spear with a single spot of blood on its point rested on a velvet table. Before him spread exhibit after exhibit, treasures from every possible time, every possible world, the stuff of myth and legend, each and every item in perfect condition, and each and every item beyond the ability of any mortal mind to fully comprehend.

"It's absolutely incredible! This entire complex is one vast museum, an archeologist's paradise. There's Neanderthal man living side by side with aliens, and more everywhere I turn!

"But who can all this possibly belong to? What race of beings could possess the power to gather all this together? And why in heaven's name would they want the Hulk as one of their exhibits?" The questions raced through Banner's mind as he rushed through the halls of the museum ship, searching for something—anything—he could truly understand.

Past the mythical Hydra, looming large in its cage, past creatures from beyond the farthest stars, Banner ran on. Then stopped as if he had been clubbed.

"My God! It looks like I'm not the *only* human being in this madhouse! That girl in the Arabian Nights exhibit is moving—she's *alive!"* Banner moved closer, somehow sensing that he could pass through the invisible boundaries that held the exhibits now that he was no longer bound by the strange shackle. But as he entered the colorful simulation of ancient Araby, the girl turned with a start.

"Whoever you are, go away! I have no more stories to tell! Leave me alone!" she screamed, tossing her polished mirror at Banner, as if it were an ax.

"Hey, take it easy, will you, lady?" Banner said, ducking the flying object. "You've got it all wrong. I'm as much a prisoner here as you are! I'm only trying to figure out what's going on around here."

"Oh, praise be to Allah," the young woman said, moving closer to Banner so he could appreciate her beauty—and her desperate sorrow.

"You don't know how I've longed for this—longed for someone to talk to besides that accursed Collector. I'm so very tired of the endless stories he commands me to tell. Please, good sir, you must get me out of here," she pleaded.

"The lady's right, mister. Yuh just gotta help us," shouted Corporal Jamie Dawson, formerly of the Confederate Army, from his Gettysburg exhibit.

"Please, human, we'd sooner die than remain in this hellish captivity," added M'blyx'll, once first among equals of the planet Gr'll'mry.

"We beg you, sir. Pray aid us in escaping," beseeched Quantus, the ancient Roman Centurian.

"From time untold, the Collector has held us here, Earthling. We can stand it no longer. Either release us—or show us the mercy of slaying us," added yet another alien creature, whose name would be wholly unpronounceable by human tongue.

"Nobody is going to die if I can help it," replied Banner. "There has to be a control room of some sort around here to power the force fields which keep you contained, and I'm going to find it."

"If you wish, Doctor Banner, I would be more than happy to show you the way," said the Collector, as he stepped out from behind a tall display case that held the cup from which Socrates had drunk his hemlock.

"Although I am well acquainted with your emerald alter ego, Doctor Banner, I'm afraid you and I have never been formally introduced. I am called the Collector, my friend, and we two have much to talk about."

From the Arabian Nights exhibit, there came a solitary wail of

despair, and then there was silence. Smiling, the Collector put a paternal arm around Banner's bare shoulders and led him away, describing in exquisite detail the many treasures that they passed.

"You seem awfuly sure of yourself, Collector, taking one of your so-called exhibits on a grand tour of your private little playground," Banner said sarcastically. "Aren't you afraid I might use what you're telling me to aid in my escape?"

"Hardly, Doctor," the Collector replied, snapping his fingers. Instantly, a bronze giant appeared before them, arriving in a blinding flash of light.

"Permit me to introduce Akbar, once the personal bodyguard of the illustrious Kublai Khan, and now my personal manservant. I have little to fear with Akbar around," the Collector said, his smile growing broader.

"No, Doctor, fear is not my problem," the ageless enigma said, his smile suddenly vanishing. "What bothers me is loneliness. For time beyond measure, I have traveled the universe, gathering my exhibits, carefully cataloging them, doing what must be done—but always doing it alone!

"And that, Doctor Banner, is where *you* come in. For you, too, are alone in a sense, forever cursed to become the monstrous Hulk, a creature whose meager intelligence must revile a man of your own great intellect.

"Well, I can rid you of the monster who dwells within you, Doctor—*permanently!"*

"What are you saying, Collector?" Banner replied in astonishment. "It's impossible! I know. I've tried."

"Perhaps, Banner, but you are not the Collector. You do not possess the fabled Elixir of Life," the ageless one said, drawing a filigreed flask from the folds of his cloak. "Drink of this, and you will never become that hideous man-brute again."

"I sense strings attached to this, Collector. What's the catch?"

"All I want of you, my good Doctor, is the one thing my boundless collection has never been able to give me—company. Someone to talk to. Someone to help me pass the endless years. In return, I offer you a cure for your affliction, and a chance to join me in exploring the secrets of the universe." The Collector held the fragile flask out to Banner, and his unsettling smile returned.

For a moment, Banner stood there, stunned by the Collector's offer. It was as if an angel had reached down and offered to grant his every wish, not only would he finally be free from the curse of the Hulk, but he would be able to devote a lifetime—no, many lifetimes—to

studying those mysteries that have baffled men of science since the beginning of recorded time.

"You want an answer, Collector? All right, I'll give you one," Banner said, looking his host straight in the eye for the first time. "You've got yourself a deal."

The emotional flow of the moment spread through the awesome museum ship, until it finally found focus in an environment that simulated swamphood. For some time, the exhibit's two nigh-mindless occupants had stood stoop shouldered, unmoving, until the Man-Thing's unique empathic nature was suddenly assaulted by the sheer ferocity of Bruce Banner's distant outburst. And the murk-dweller shambled forth, drawn to the seething emotions as a moth is drawn to flame.

At first, the electronic stasis shackle around his ankle was carried along by the meandering Man-Thing, until the miry once-man reached the perimeters of the force field. There, the gleaming shackle stopped, as it was designed to do. Its mossy captive, however, did not. As the Man-Thing pressed relentlessly forward, the shackle was pulled clean through its awful leg, falling to the ground with a soft thud.

Almost as if comprehending what its dull eyes had seen, the golem wrenched its own shackle through its claylike leg, and tossed it aside. Then the two misshapen monsters lumbered out of their confinement, and through the endless halls of the ship, shuffling ever so slowly past the bewildered gaze of creatures even more incredible than they.

And for the first time in memory—although these monsters had no memory—they moved with a sense of purpose.

The Collector breathed in slowly, relishing the tasteless, computer-controlled air for the first time in all too many centuries. He studied the somber young scientist standing before him for what seemed like many minutes before he could find his voice to speak.

"You cannot know how pleased I am that you have accepted my offer, Doctor," the Collector said, struggling desperately to control his eager emotions. "I've journeyed back and forth across the infinite, trying to find someone who would—"

A sharp, piercing squeal interrupted the Collector in mid-sentence. His hopeful eyes narrowed to suspicious slits as he glared at a crimson light blinking on a broad control panel.

"Eh? The cell signal! One of the exhibits has escaped!"

Banner turned toward the panel in confusion. "What do you mean? What are you talking about?"

“Don’t you understand, Banner?” the Collector shouted, unable to contain his rising furor. “One of the *exhibits* has escaped! It has to be found—returned to its cell!”

“Exhibits?” Banner rolled the word around in his mind. “My God, that’s really all those people are to you, isn’t it? Nothing but lousy exhibits!

“I must have been out of my mind to agree to your offer,” Banner snarled, as the bronze giant Akbar moved toward him. “Our deal is off, Collector, and neither your promised salvation nor your muscle-bound bodyguard can stop me from making amends for what I almost did!”

“Akbar,” the Collector shouted, eyes blazing now with fury, “stop that young fool—and do it swiftly!”

Sinews bunched, his right hand gripping a razor-sharp silver scimitar, the Collector’s massive manservant leaped across the chamber, his yellowing teeth clenched in grim commitment.

Banner barely avoided the scimitar’s first swing and dove toward the computer console lining one wall. But, with stunning swiftness Akbar’s powerful arm lashed out, sending the frail physicist sprawling back over a bank of machinery, his pulse racing, his blood pounding in his ears.

“Excellent. Akbar,” the Collector said, pleased with his servant’s work. “Now come. We must recapture the escaped exhibits.”

But Akbar’s rage had yet to be sated. “No, Master,” he growled as he charged forward, sword arm raised in fusty anticipation. “The little one dared to attack you. For that, he must die!”

Akbar’s sword slashed downward, the silver elinting dully in the artificial light. In a moment, the little one would be split asunder, the bronze giant assured himself. Had not countless others, after all, stained his magnificent blade with their blood?

Suddenly, for no explicable reason—at least as far as Akbar was concerned—his slashing sword stopped in midswing. It took a moment for the dim-witted giant executioner to realize that a massive jade-hued fist held his brawny wrist in a grip of iron.

Akbar’s dull eyes grew wide in astonishment. He had expected to find the frail Doctor Banner cowering in fear behind the computer console. Instead, a monstrous green behemoth rose from behind the machinery, emerald eyes ablaze.

In utter confusion, Akbar turned toward his master who was already reaching for the filigreed flask he had placed on a nearby table. “Master,” Akbar stammered uncertainly, with more than a trace of fear coloring his words, “the little one is gone . . . and there is a

monster in his place."

The green Goliath did not wait for Akbar to finish his explanation. He merely lashed out with a massive emerald fist that caught the bronze barbarian on the point of his jaw, sending him hurtling into the opposite wall, where he slumped to the floor, unconscious.

Then the man-brute turned toward the astonished Collector.

"You! Hulk remembers you, prune face. You are Hulk's enemy!" the green Goliath growled. The Collector backed away slowly, half in fear, half in awe of this monstrous creature who had defeated his mighty manservant. Mere weeks before, Akbar had bested Krogg, the champion of the planet Orion, and Krogg was reputed to be the mightiest warrior in all the known galaxies. What, then, did that make the Hulk?

"You don't understand, my friend. I'm not your enemy. I swear I'm not!" the Collector pleaded. "Look at me. Hulk! Hear what I have to say! Do you see this vial in my hand?"

Silently, the Hulk nodded, and a faint smile crossed the Collector's ancient face. The emerald giant was listening to him. There was still hope. "Just drink of this elixir, my friend," the Collector said, handing the small flask to the man-brute. "It is the Elixir of Life, and it will change you back to Bruce Banner—*permanently!"*

It felt as if eternities had passed before the Hulk finally understood the meaning of the Collector's desperate words. "Stuff in bottle will turn Hulk into puny Banner, the one Hulk hates most in all the world?" the monster said slowly, obviously forcing himself to think. "Why would Hulk want to be puny Banner? Why would Hulk want to be anyone but Hulk?"

For a moment, the jade-hued giant stared at the tiny bottle in his hand, and the glowing crimson fluid within. Then very slowly, very deliberately, his hand became a fist, crushing the fragile flask to slivers. "Hulk hates Banner," the man-monster snarled. "When Hulk finds Banner, Hulk will crush him—like *this!*

"But in the meantime, prune face," the Hulk said, almost grinning as he looked up at the Collector once more, "Hulk will crush *you!"*

Powerful green hands suddenly lashed out, but all they grabbed was a mist that swirled and shifted and oozed through his fingers before melting into nothingness. The man-brute looked around, bewildered.

"I doubt you'll be in any condition to crush so much as a flea, my monstrous friend. The Collector is not without power of his own."

The man-brute spun on his heel, to find his silver-haired foe standing behind him. *"Huh?* How did prune face get behind Hulk? You were in Hulk's hands!"

The Collector merely broadened his grin. “The question is not how I escaped you, my friend, but how *you* will escape *me!”*

Snarling in bestial fury, the man-brute tried to lunge at his tormentor, but found he could not. Shimmering lights danced like twinkling stars before his hooded eyes.

The Collector gestured flamboyantly as he watched the helpless behemoth pound his prison of lights to no avail. “You’re trapped in the most powerful force field at my disposal, Hulk,” the ageless figure explained, “so if you’re inclined to smash something, try smashing that!”

The emerald creature growled in rage and defiance. *“Bah!* Hulk will smash puny lights, prune face, and then Hulk will smash you!”

But the Collector was already gone, his cape swirling behind him as he vanished down one of the museum ship’s infinite corridors. The Hulk would be safely contained in his force-field cell, the ageless one knew. The behemoth could continue to pound the swirling energies to his heart’s content, but it would not really matter. Not in the long run. The Hulk was his prize now, another item to be added to his collection, just another exhibit in his private museum.

No, the Collector’s thoughts were not on the Hulk or his boundless rage. He was more concerned now with his other exhibits. One of them had somehow been set free. One of them was out roaming his corridors.

The museum ship’s mutely lit corridors seemed to stretch on forever. They circled giant amber cages in which creatures who were part bird, part man, and mostly some beast unknown, sat hunched over some tainted specimen of alien meat, feasting hungrily. They wound past glass-enclosed living dioramas, where survivors of long-extinct civilizations forever wondered what fate had befallen their ancient ancestors.

Most of the creatures sitting slumped within their cages said nothing. The precious spark which had once given them thought had been long since extinguished.

But there were others, creatures from different times and planets who had only recently been added to the Collector’s trove of treasures. And they were not content to sit placidly and while away their lives as the captive pets of an inhuman master. No, they were merely waiting for the right moment.

Their moment.

Unaware of the fascinating array of diverse life forms which stared at him, pleaded with him, begged him to help them, he shambled

slowly through the endless corridors. He was oblivious to everything, save for the churning emotions which led him ever onward.

He was the Man-Thing, and he had long ago become far more thing than man. But somewhere deep within his primitive consciousness, he felt the presence of another, lumbering mutely beside him. A kindred spirit, another hapless creature trapped within a misshapen, inhuman form.

Together, silently, the Man-Thing and the golem trudged through the Collector's museum of nightmares.

"So! I should have realized it would be you who escaped."

The Collector glared at the two monstrous creatures standing mutely before him, a trail of viscous slime behind them betraying the path they had taken. Deliberately, the ageless figure raised one powerful, gloved hand and the force-field lights winked off in several cages. Muscular gladiators from a dozen different worlds instantly leaped from their raised environmental platforms, landing nimbly on the corridor's polished floor.

"Take them, my obedient ones," shouted the Collector, as he gestured toward the Man-Thing and the golem. "Subdue them however you must."

The first gladiator lunged forward, a golden trident clutched tightly in his hand. "It will take but a moment, Master," the gladiator boasted. "Nothing that lives can stand against the trident of Tiberius!"

The black-maned warrior plunged his gleaming weapon squarely into the golem's vast chest, then gaped in shock and horror as the claylike creature reached down with one moist hand and pulled it free, obviously unharmed by the deadly assault.

Before the stunned gladiator could recover his senses, the golem swung its heavy hand, and smashed him into unconsciousness.

Tiberius' scream of pain assailed the Man-Thing mercilessly. His sensitive empathic nature made him reel with the overwhelming pressure of the emotions which swept over him. Thus, he did not even feel it when another gladiator, this time a nine-foot-tall giant from a star system several thousand parsecs from Earth, leaped to join the fray.

"Tiberius' boastful ways were ever his undoing, but the strangling net of Braccus will draw the second demon to me."

With a single smooth motion, the crimson giant flung a great silver net over the Man-Thing's lumbering form. The murk-dweller reacted to this latest threat as he did to all the others. He shambled on heedlessly, as if nothing had happened.

Braccus drew the net tight, then watched in astonishment as it

slipped harmlessly through the murk-dweller's seemingly substanceless form.

"By the gods, it cannot be," muttered Braccus. "My metal net has pulled right through the accursed creature."

"Then forget the net, you dolt," shouted the Collector. "You have a sword, man—*use* it!"

Braccus' gleaming silver sword flashed twice in the mutely lit chamber. Both times it slashed cleanly through the Man-Thing's horrible flesh, drawing nothing but muck and mire. And the swamp monster kept coming.

Frightened now, the alien gladiator backed away from the misshapen mockery of life that shambled toward him. The revulsion that welled up within him swiftly gave way to sheer abject terror.

The shambling swamp beast felt the gladiator's emotions, sensed the hatred, the pure terror. Awkwardly, the Man-Thing reached out a slime-encrusted claw to stifle the unpleasant emotions, his foul-smelling fingers closing about Braccus' face. And, regrettably, though quite understandably, the gladiator panicked.

Instantly, Braccus' face began to smoke, the fetid stench of smoldering flesh filling the air. The gladiator screamed, but it did him little good.

Whatever knows fear burns at the Man-Thing's touch.

The control chamber resounded with a monotonous pounding like the din of thunder gone mad.

Again and again, faster and faster, harder and harder, the incredible Hulk drove his massive fists into the wall of lights that held him captive. And with each awesomely powerful punch, with each frustrating failure to break free, the man-brute grew madder.

And, as legend has it, the madder the Hulk gets, the stronger he gets.

Relentlessly, tirelessly, the man-brute continued his assault, hammering against the intangible barrier that restrained him. And then, when it seemed that even his awesome power had reached its limits, his strength somehow seemed to renew itself. As impossible as it might seem, he grew stronger, more powerful, until not even the Collector's sizzling energy field could contain the Hulk's growing power.

A final crushing blow, and the twinkling lights abruptly vanished—but the Hulk's rage was not yet spent.

Still wild with frenzy, the man-brute turned on the banks of complex machinery that filled the control chamber, his monstrous fists

reducing them to so much scrap.

"Prune face tried to keep Hulk prisoner with his machines, but puny machines cannot stop *Hulk!"* roared the green Goliath. "Nothing can stop Hulk! *Nothing!"*

Still furious, the Hulk finally turned from the vast expanse of wreckage that now surrounded him, lumbering toward the open door of the control room. "Prune face did this," he muttered. "So Hulk, will go find prune face. And then Hulk will squash him like rotten fruit!"

Unbeknownst to the Hulk himself, his devastating temper tantrum had done far more than merely decimate the Collector's control room and his invaluable computer circuitry. For, without the machinery which sustained them, the museum ship's twinkling force-field barriers suddenly ceased to exist. And, without the force fields to restrain them, the Collector's living "exhibits" were free for the first time in centuries.

Suddenly, countless human and inhuman figures alike were scurrying about. Alien creatures who had been imprisoned since before the dawn of recorded time watched in tremulous horror as their fellow prisoners made a mad dash for freedom. Were the others crazy, these few wondered. What possible good could come of all this newfound freedom? Life was meant to be regimented, they had learned from the Collector. Life was meant to be restrained. And yet . . . And yet . . .

Even as the euphoria of sudden freedom overwhelmed the escaped captives, a new sound could be heard; the monotonous tread of approaching soldiers. These were the Collector's personal defenders, and they charged toward the startled ex-exhibits like a living wedge.

"Protect yourselves, my brothers in captivity," shouted a reptilian warrior of the race of Badoon, as he hefted the laser pistol that had proven so ineffectual against his force-field prison. "If we are to die, then let us go down fighting!"

"Fighting will only delay the inevitable, Badoon, for you fight a battle you cannot hope to win. Surrender now, and spare yourself great pain."

The Badoon whirled, already dreading what he knew he would see. For the daring alien recognized that chilling voice, and he knew that in that moment, his cause was lost.

"Yours was a noble effort, Badoon," the Collector said grimly, "but one doomed to fail." And, with that, an eerie light seemed to flash from the ancient conqueror's glove, paralyzing the Badoon warrior where he stood, before he could hope to trigger his useless laser pistol.

Then, the Collector gestured to the armored figures at his side. “Strike, my faithful defenders,” he shouted. “Drive the rabble back where they belong!”

“Never, Collector,” snarled one of the shape-shifting Skrull race, as he tossed the fallen Badoon’s laser weapon to the shaggy Cro-Magnon man standing at his side. “We’d sooner die than be your prisoners again!”

“Then so be it, fools—*so be it!”* the Collector replied savagely, his anger overriding his good sense.

Two brawny bodies suddenly flew past the startled eyes of the Collector. The first he recognized as the faithful captain of his loyal defenders. The identity of the second didn’t really matter. For the Collector’s gaze was riveted upon the lumbering emerald figure who had so casually tossed the two warriors aside. And in that moment, he knew a fear he had never known before.

“Hulk is coming to crush you, prune face—just like Hulk promised,” the man-brute snarled as he stalked forward, clearing a path through the battling bodies with a single swipe of his ponderous paw.

“I should have realized that mindless monster was somehow responsible for this,” the Collector thought, as he beat a rather hasty retreat. “I mustn’t allow him to get those grotesque hands on me.”

“You cannot run away from Hulk, prune face,” the jade behemoth roared. He crouched low, tensing his powerful leg muscles for a leap which would carry him across the chamber to the fleeing Collector’s side.

“My friend—*wait!”*

The man-brute paused at the sound. The voice was soft-spoken, quite out of place in this raging battlefield. And somehow oddly familiar.

The green Goliath turned, to find himself facing a dark-haired angel —the girl from the Arabian Nights exhibit.

“Please, my friend, don’t run away from us. We need you.”

The Hulk studied the woman carefully. She was young, beautiful, and seemed not at all afraid.

“What does girl want with Hulk?” the man-brute asked suspiciously.

Tenderly, the young woman approached the brute, as if somehow sensing his uncertainty. “I can see now why the Collector captured you,” she said, her soft voice slowly calming the raging spirit which dwelt within the Hulk. “You are two beings in one. But still I recognize your clothing . . . and the valor in your soul. You swore you’d release us, and you have. But now you must lead us to freedom.”

For a moment, the Hulk stood silent, uncertain of what next to do.

"Please, my hero," the young woman beseeched him, "you're the only hope we have."

Hesitant, the Hulk glanced after the fleeing figure of the Collector, dwindling away down a distant corridor. "But prune face is getting away," the man-brute muttered, "and Hulk swore Hulk would smash him before . . ." His deep voice suddenly faded, as his dim mind flickered.

"Hero?" the brute said softly. "You think Hulk is hero?"

"Yes, my friend," she assured him, "you're our sole hope of survival. The others will all follow you, but you must be willing to lead."

"Then Hulk will forget prune face," the green Goliath snarled, "and do as girl says."

Taking the man-brute's massive hand in her own, the girl steered him toward one of the yawning corridors. "Swiftly, my friend, the exit hatch lies this way."

The Hulk's brooding eyes sought out the others, the shambling forms of the muck-encrusted Man-Thing and the equally gruesome golem. He studied the aliens and the others, then gestured with one mighty knotted arm.

"Come," the man-monster shouted, "and Hulk will take you away from this strange place."

"Then lead on, man," an ex-gladiator responded. "To be rid of this accursed prison, we would follow you anywhere!"

"Aye, even into hell itself," finished one of the judges of witch-haunted Salem.

Anxiously, all of the Collector's ex-exhibits turned to accompany the emerald man-brute out of the museum of the mad. All, that is, save one.

Slowly, deliberately, the grotesque golem shuffled away from the excited throng, to be lost in the yawning bowels of the great ship—his destination and his purpose unknown to anyone save he.

Back in his control room, the Collector struggled desperately to repair his shattered equipment. "It's still not too late," he kept repeating. "If I can just manage to jury-rig some of this ruined circuitry, I can still recapture my rebellious collection. All I have to do is—*eh?"*

The startled Collector turned toward a sudden soft slushing sound behind him. "It's the golem," he said in astonishment. "Why did he not flee with the others? What is he doing here?"

Deep within the befuddled brain that still dwelt beneath the clay creature's gruesome exterior, a faint spark smoldered—a spark that

swiftly fanned itself into a raging flame at the sight of the one who was responsible for his hideous fate.

Sensing this, the Collector was suddenly afraid.

"Stay back, Golem. Stay back, I say! What do you want from me?"

For an instant, the clay creature paused, pondering the Collector's question, recalling how it might yet be almost human but for the ageless mystery man's whim. And then, at last, his primitive mind found an answer.

What the golem wanted was simple; he wanted the Collector's life.

A deadly shadow fell across the terrified Collector's face, and he screamed one plaintive soulful scream. It was a sound that faded to nothingness long before it could filter through the museum ship's endless corridors.

For several interminable seconds, silence reigned within the star-spanning craft and without. Then everything abruptly returned to normal.

Propelled by a single blow from the Hulk's huge emerald fist, the vessel's exit portal erupted savagely out into the swamp. Moments later a satisfied Hulk exited with a myriad of creatures who had been little more than exhibits for far too long a time.

"How good it is to take that first fresh breath of freedom," sighed one who had once been Julius Caesar's foremost gladiator.

"Thank you for all you have done for us, my friend," said the beautiful young girl, as she took the man-brute's hand once more.

"Girl is happy?" the Hulk asked timidly.

"Happier than I've ever been."

"Then Hulk is happy too."

"Come on, folks," cried Jamie Dawson, corporal in the Army of the Confederacy. "There's a whole new world a-waitin' fer us out there."

But the bright rejoicing of those newly freed was all too terribly short-lived, as that "new world" suddenly began to claim its due.

"Wh-what's wrong with me?" a Napoleonic captain asked, looking down at the lines and wrinkles spreading rapidly across his hands. "I feel so odd . . . so weak . . ."

Before the man-brute's startled eyes, his time-tossed companions began to wither and fall, the heavy hand of the centuries pressing down on them like an all-oppressive weight. Not one of them was spared.

Even as the Hulk looked on in helpless horror, the beautiful young girl who had so recently befriended him collapsed at his feet.

“Girl? What is wrong, girl? How can Hulk help you?”

“It’s far too late for that now,” she replied, her creamy skin now the color of parchment. “We should have known . . . Beyond the protective confines of the Collector’s ship, all the untold years we spent as his captives are catching up to us at last.”

“No,” the man-brute shouted to the now-frail figure before him, “Hulk will not let—”

“Hush, my friend,” the old woman said through cracked and drying lips, as she put a gnarled finger to the jade behemoth’s mouth, silencing him. “It’s all right. We said we’d rather die than remain the Collector’s prisoners—and we meant it.

“Farewell, my friend, and thank you for everything. Perhaps now we can finally find peace.” With that, she sighed softly, and crumbled into dust, joining her companions in that last great sleep of peace.

At the edge of the clearing, the Man-Thing watched the tragic tableau in silence as always, his empathic nature echoing the Hulk’s confusion, frustration, and sheer helplessness. Finally, as if sensing there was nothing more he could do, the murk-dweller shambled off, to be swallowed by the shadows of the swamp, leaving behind him a most forlorn Hulk and a great gleaming starcraft that was already being overgrown with moss.

In a matter of weeks, no one would be able to tell that either of them had ever been there.

And, worse, no one would care.